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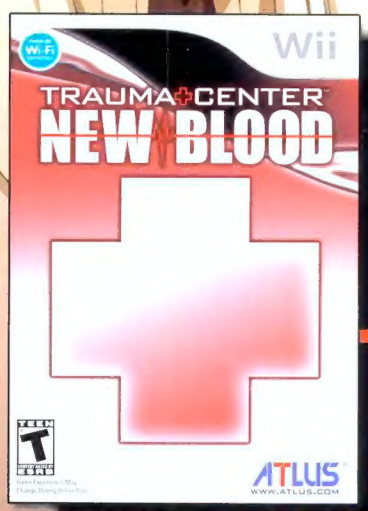

PLAY

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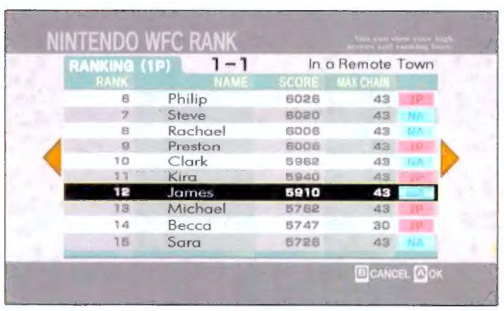

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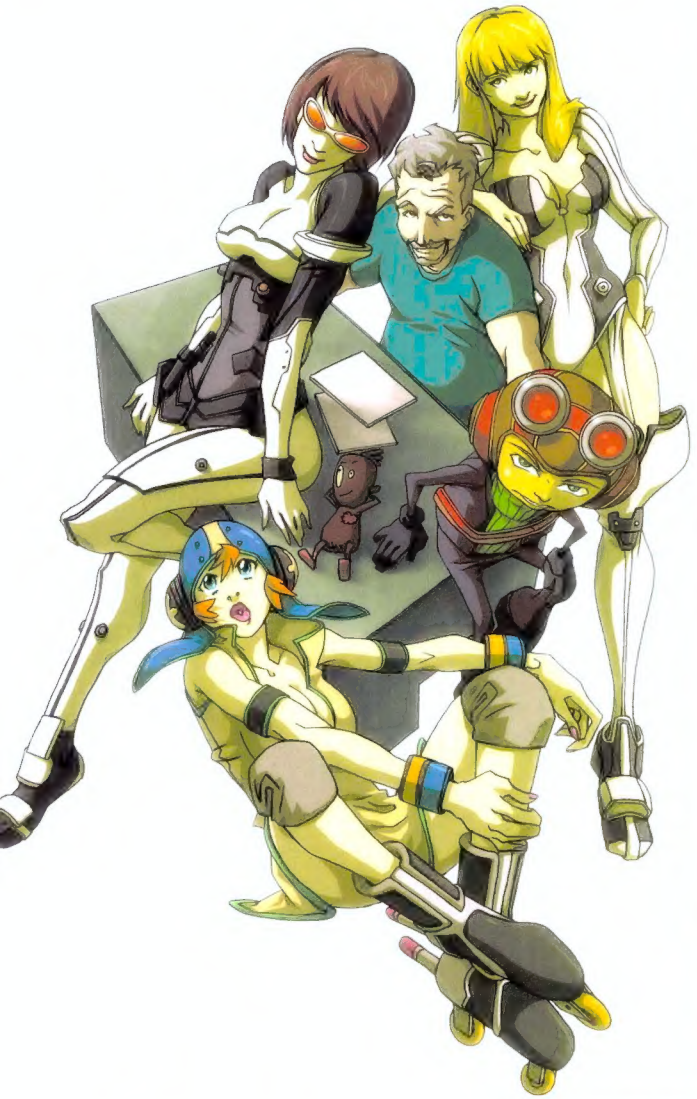

Art by **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

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PS3 Ho-ho-hos

As the best year ever—for games anyway—winds down there are a couple of things eating away at my fragile existence as a video game critic. Luckily I have this wonderful forum in which to vent my frustrations, else I might do something crazy, like visit an online chat room, or eat cow balls to win a date with a hot Asian chick. So pull up a chair and keep your tray tables in the uptight position.

First up is how whenever any system in particular goes on a run—as the PS3 has recently via a string of fantastic games—whoever doesn't own that console feels the need to incite that we're in some way biased or, my favorite, "fanboys." We're certainly fans of games and all but one of us are boys, so that's true any day of the week. Fact is, we could care less what console a game is on. Sure we dig the PS3's specs and how it translates to their first-party games but if the 360 or Wii goes on a roll we'll do the same thing we always do, just review the games pertaining to how well they perform given the system they're on and demographic they're for. Last year we were 360 fanboys, and then we were Wii haters, and now we're PS3 whores. Can't we just be game whores and leave it at that?

Next on the agenda—how you doin' by the way? need anything? well go get it, I'm not done—is game length. Attention all humans: you cannot judge a game by its length. To do so is to reveal ignorance in all things game development related. Every game developer faces a give-and-take situation in order to come in on time and on budget with a given project. To make a game as detail-oriented and fast paced as Heavenly Sword, let's say, where you pass through each environment one time, 20 hours long would take many more years and many more millions of dollars. If Heavenly Sword played like Baldur's Gate and it was six hours long then you could bitch. RPGs are long, sandbox games are long...you get my point. A six-hour-long pure action game on next-gen hardware is a marathon. Judge games by how they make you feel, how fun they are, how well made, and how beautiful (or not). Don't tell me I can't give a six-hour-long action game a 10. What, is Donkey Kong Country crap now because it's three hours long? The same people who say Heavenly Sword (and every other game under 10 hours...don't they have jobs?) whine that Odin Sphere is repetitive for a 60-hour-long game. Attention unemployed game renter; it's repetitive because it's a 60-hour-long game... Fortunately 99.9% of the BS I'm referring to comes from the Internet, where America's disgruntled masses go to revel in their misery.

I don't even know why I'm airing this here. We received exactly one such complaint from an actual Play reader. It's nice being the magazine for smart people. Well, all but that guy.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

Editorial

Editor In Chief **Dave Halverson**
Executive Editor **Brady Fiechter**
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Copy Editor **Daniel Campisi**
Original art by **Dany Orizio**

Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher **Michael Eisenberg**
Account Executive **Cassandra Mushburger**
cmusburger@geekmonthly.com
Tel (818) 707-7786 x105
Contact **Michael Eisenberg**
sales@playmagazine.com
Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102
Fax 818.707.7212\

play magazine online

Online Content Manager **Eric Patterson**
webmaster@playmagazine.com

Corporate

Director Of Operations **Julie Halverson**
jhalverson@playmagazine.com
818.707.7786 ext.104

VP of Sales & Marketing **Michael Eisenberg**
meisenberg@playmagazine.com

Administrative Assistant **Daniel Campisi**
dcampisi@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions and Customer Service
(in U.S.) 800-694-6506
(outside U.S.) 818-487-2036
email: play@espcomp.com

play magazine Offices
Fusion Publishing, Inc.
29229 Canwood St., Suite 200
Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

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HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.

playback

January 2007

letters@playmagzine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Tonight on 20/20...

I am an employee of a major video game retailer, and it has recently come to my attention that our company intends to stockpile all current and future shipments of Nintendo Wii systems until Black Friday. Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, is always the biggest shopping day of the year. It is my understanding that the retailer for which I work is not alone in this practice, and that Nintendo supports this tactic for boosted demand on their product. As an employee, I have been directed to inform customers that we are "sold out" of Wii systems, even though we have many, and will have more in future shipments. I have been told by upper powers that be to lie openly to customers about the availability of this one item.

I understand the persistence of customers, and the insane demand for the Nintendo Wii. The demand for this system will only go up now that Super Mario Galaxy has released. Many customers are savvy enough to wait outside our store for daily shipments to arrive—more savvy customers still know the box in which Wii systems are shipped. I don't look forward to explaining to a customer who sees systems arrive that the store for which I work does not have them available for sale. Not to mention wasting customers time for repeat visits and phone calls looking for an elusive system. Ultimately I don't think this is right, and I believe the customer deserves the truth of why Wiis will be nearly impossible to get until after Black Friday—during the mad holiday shopping rush. Looks as though internet auction sellers will really be happy the next few weeks. Is this sound business practice? Am I overreacting? I think some ethical questions are also brought into play by this type of business practice, and that is one of the many reasons I have brought this issue to light.

Name withheld

Too real?

So I just conquered Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare and eerily I'm shocked. With a setting taking place in a world much like our own and with themes resembling real current events, I think Infinity Ward might be pushing some buttons.

First things first, I enjoyed the game. It's chaotic, beautiful, strategic and from what I hear, it's got great multiplayer. Definitely my favorite first person shooter of the year and that's coming from someone who has a casual interest in the genre. So why did this game shock me? Try and stay with me here...

I remember ten years ago, I was playing, nay, engulfed in the experiences that were Final Fantasy VII, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and Tomb Raider II. My immersion was being Cloud, Alucard and Lara Croft (okay skip that one, heh) and you couldn't drag me away from interacting with these games as if I was living them. I was younger then too. Fast forward to the present and we all know how the gaming world has changed. Young gamers idolized Master Chief and spend countless hours on online war games frag fests.

Many of us have some personal experience in this current war we're in. Either you've served or have a family member or friend fighting. An almost harsh realism of this war is being portrayed in games now, as is very evident with Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. Movies have been doing it for years. The message behind these movies has usually been "war is bad." I wonder how this level of realism will be handled by the gaming community, especially a younger audience who I know are just dying to play this game. Talking to several people, this game has hit emotionally on different levels. The level where you're operating the 25, 40 and 105 mm cannons from an airship is an almost dead on depiction to an actual highlight reel of our current war. The Shock and Awe level left me frighteningly enthralled at it's finale with my personal fear of nuclear war. I'm sure there are more personal relations with moments from this game and other people.

I am not preaching pro or anti war. I am not bagging on this game. I am just curiously observing what impact this game's realism might bring. Maybe nothing. All I know is that I was so into this game, but on a much different level than I was with games ten years ago. Will this level of realism sway people's opinions, one way or another, on certain real topics, much like the way *Saving Private Ryan* or *Platoon* did about war? Have games reached this level of authenticity and debate? Just a thought.

Raul A

Back-atcha

Earlier today, I read Brady Fiechter's Back of the Book segment on wanting less, and I couldn't agree more.

The gaming industry seems to be going through an ever-evolving state of perpetual puberty—just when we get a handle on who we are and what we're capable of, the scenery changes. New systems emerge. We find hairs where there were no hairs before. Polygons look prettier to us now than they did just yesterday (what with their angles and points that drive men wild). We gain more capabilities and more freedom to do whatever it is we want, to experiment in ways that, in the early days of the industry—before it was an industry, we would have never thought possible. I remember seeing Dragon's Lair so many moons ago and thinking that it wasn't possible for any game to ever look better than that. But is this freedom, this ability to continuously challenge ourselves on a technical level, taking away from what really matters in games?

I feel exactly like Brady does. Far too often in the last decade of my gaming life, since the day when I realized I had to move on from my beloved SNES and embrace a third dimension, I have felt that twinge that no gamer should feel—a desire for a game I am playing to just END. And not necessarily because it's a bad game per se, but because I've had my fill. Because the developer has lost their lust for the story and it's becoming more and more obvious as it limps towards the end with nonsensical plot devices, or random fetch quests, or something designed to artificially lengthen the play time for the sake of plastering on the box "Look at us! It will take you 50 hours to conquer this!" I find I would much rather play something that takes me a fraction of a day to beat and leaves me breathless and excited for more, and even a little pissed that there isn't more. I love everything Dostoevsky has ever written, but damn if I don't get a thrill from a tight little Paul Auster text. Short is not bad.

In fact, all the games I can think of that have truly made my gaming life so full have been short. Sure there are longer ones like The latter Zelda and Mario games, or Xenogears, the Final Fantasy series, etc. But then there are the truly great ones. Super Metroid is, to this day, my favorite game of all time. I can plow through it in an hour and a half, but never, for even a moment, is that time dull or lacking. The Zelda series is still incredible, but A Link to the Past is the pinnacle for me. I can beat that in five hours solid, but it's world feels so much more alive than any of the 3D entries into the series (Why have such massive open expanses if you're going to leave them empty?!). Even with RPG's. Final Fantasy 6, Final Fantasy 12, Dragon Quest 8... all three are at the top of my list in that genre. Each one is mind blowing and pulls me in like nothing else. But my favorite RPG to this day is still Chrono Trigger. Not just for the story and characters, although they are incredible, but it is tight. There is no excess in that game whatsoever. It's story moves from point A to point B at a breakneck pace and never leaves you bored or thinking that the game is stringing you along with nothing better to do than make you think you've gotten more length for your buck. Hell, the main game on your first run through takes under 20 hours—with side quests (although if you are young and convinced Schala must be able to be found somewhere in the game you might spend months looking for her... damn Chrono Cross). With the new game + feature that playtime drops significantly. But you know what? I've played that game more than 20 times in my life, from start to finish. I can only imagine how many times I might have played Final Fantasy XII, just for the characters and story, if it had that same feature.

Even critical praise seems somewhat disjointed. I've read a great deal of criticism for Heavenly Sword's length, but then I think back to other games that have had praise heaped upon them despite or because of their length. Metal Gear Solid was the first game to ever receive a perfect score in EGM. That is a 3 hour game if you know what you are doing... even if you don't that time doesn't increase exponentially. Ico. Shadow of the Colossus. Both are absolutely brilliant in every respect, and both can be finished in one extended sitting. Even the God of War games somewhat straddle the line; some will say an eight-hour playthrough for each one is small, I say that I wouldn't want much more than that. It's breakneck for what it is, but any more and it risks losing the incredible pace.

And that's what a lot of this is about—pace. Those shorter games have a pace, an urgency that draws you in and doesn't let go. Times aren't artificially increased for the sake of it. The games are what they are and don't try to be anything more than that. Yes, long games can be brilliant and engaging—again, FF12 and DQ8 come to mind, but also the GTA series—and can create worlds that we've never seen, but even then I think there should be incentive to start over. I think the new game + feature should be adopted for any title with an extended story. That can be a compelling enough reason to play again (Xenogears would make so much more sense on subsequent runs) beyond just the base mechanics of the game.

I still love my games that take me weeks to get through, but the ones I come back to are the ones that will thrill and excite me for a few fantastic hours and leave me wanting more right then and there. And as sit here playing through the last few levels of Twilight Princess, I keep thinking back to A Link to the Past and remembering how much more alive that world was. It didn't matter that it was so short. It made me feel like I was in the game, completely entrenched. Now I just feel like I'm an elf riding a horse because it takes too damn long to cross the field on foot.

Andrew W

"...easily the PlayStation 3 (system)'s premiere, must-have title."

-Game Informer

"...a highly playable action game that will satisfy even the most demanding FPS junkies."

-GamePro

"5 out of 5"
-G4

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-Game Informer

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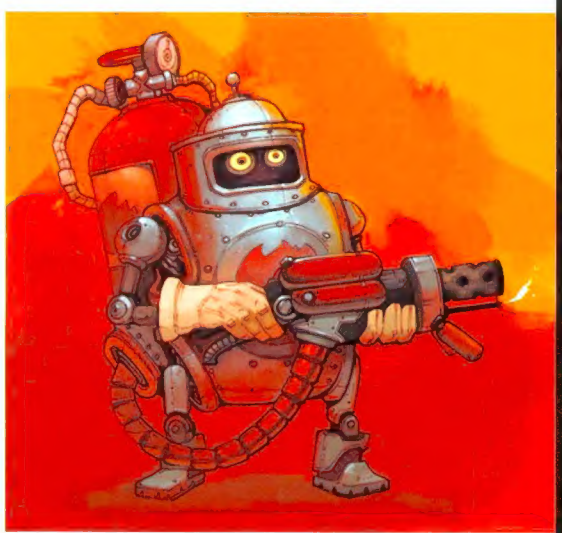
It's a Vogster?!

Take a right at Kazakhstan ...

words Dave Halverson

You may not know them yet but very soon the name Vogster will bring about warm fuzzy feelings of fresh new IPs for the Xbox 360, PC and handhelds. The New York-based developer with studios in Moscow, Russia and Kiev, Ukraine is on a mission to position themselves as a top-tier developer, and if their first IP is any indication they're well on their way. The yet-to-be-named DS game (heretofore known as Kaboom Kaboom), which is being written by Jay Lender and Micah Wright of SpongeBob Squarepants fame, is a totally stylus controlled, pick-up-and-play RTS featuring 20+ missions leading fully upgradeable wise-cracking robots into the heat of battle, complete with over 25 groundbreaking wacky weapons and hilarious destruction. We'll have a full-on preview (and a name) on this extremely ambitious DS project along with more on Vogster next issue. Until then feast your eyes on the first screens and design concepts. Very nice!



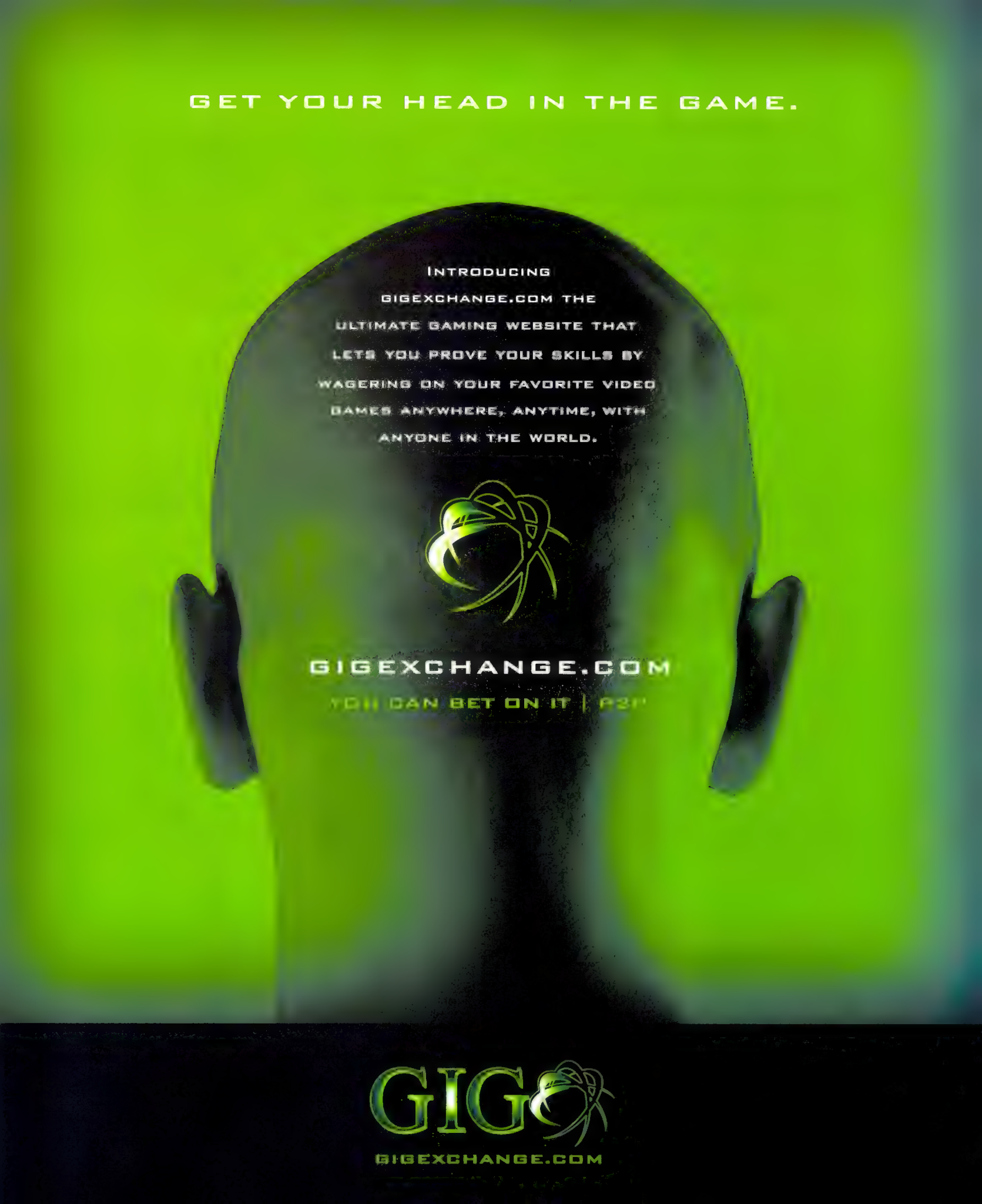
I love the smell of fresh IP in the morning!

It's your Birthday...

PS3 turns 1

Two-hundred software titles and more than 60 million PSN content downloads later the PS3 turned one on November 11. Now that the console's 50GB capacity has begun to shine through, together with the introduction of dual price points, things are really starting to look up as the year comes to a close. With the average first-party PS3 game weighing in at around 20GB (well beyond the HD-DVD format), we've already begun to see the potential of the system, although it still remains vastly untapped. There's no telling where second- and third-generation PS3-exclusive games might take us as the years roll by, but we're buckled up with our tray tables in the upright position.

Since introducing the new hardware models and pricing, Sony is already seeing strong sales momentum. PS3 sales increased by 192% at the top-10 retailers in North America in November, with overall PlayStation brand units up 178%. For the week including Black Friday PS3 hardware sales increased by 245% when compared to Black Friday sales last year; and since the November 2 introduction of the 40GB and 80GB models, PS3 hardware sales have increased by 298%. Meanwhile PSP sales are way up and we're finally seeing the PS2 take its Long Walk after seven-plus years of dedicated service. Now go buy your PS3 a birthday present.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TOMB RAIDER

Woman versus wild

WQ

(working title)

We've seen so much over the course of a year—without question the most pivotal period in gaming history in terms of not only technology, but gaming as a staple of American life. For casual gamers the gate has been swung wide open and for those of us who have been around since the beginning, a new day is dawning. So after Assassin's Creed, Uncharted, Mass Effect, Halo 3, Heavenly Sword, and so on, where do we go from here? As pivotal a year it's been, it's hard to believe that it's only the tip of the next-generation iceberg…

When word came down from on high at Eidos that Lara Croft, the fairest gaming heroine of them all, had been taken from her childhood home at Core Design and whisked away to a new American family at Crystal Dynamics, nobody really knew what to think. Was this the beginning of the end? That last nail in the coffin that Angel of Darkness built around her? Or was this one of the most daring yet savvy

MB RAIDER

"Giving players the opportunity to participate as much as possible in defining their experience is very important for Tomb Raider and games in general..."

moves in the annals of franchise history? Tomb Raider: Legend put that query to bed, and then Tomb Raider: Anniversary tore the lid off that coffin. Lara wasn't just back, she was better than ever...but you haven't seen anything yet.

As I sat down for the first-ever demo of Tomb Raider 8—which I must admit, felt damn good—there was uneasiness in the room. Nobody outside of Crystal or Eidos had ever seen the first true next-gen Lara, let alone the gameplay. That tension quickly dissipated as I began my vocal barrage of "oohs" and "ahhs" laying eyes on Lara for the first time. The new Lara is a marvel to behold. Her subtle muscularity, skin, definition around the knees, back, elbows, hair, eyes...everything...she's come to life—she's real. Roll around in the mud and she gets dirty—not everywhere, but dynamically—a knee in the mud and only that knee gets muddy, before the rain slowly rinses it away. Speaking of the rain, the way it cascades down her body, around her neck and into the small of her back, is for lack of a better word, insane. This is a living, breathing entity, and she moves as good as she looks. The new Lara no longer moves like a video game character. The old rules have been tossed aside in favor of a newly motion captured Lady Croft. Whether she's shooting, grappling, climbing, redirecting, swimming, or fighting—she's newly fitted with melee skills—she does so in a most realistic fashion. Using a combination of motion capture and hand animation, Lara Croft has been born anew yet again.

Above: Lara's uncovered a secret chamber. Below: A wildlife encounter of the up-close-and-personal kind.

Ah, but what of the game? Are we to bask once again in yet another token treasure hunt with all the usual trappings? Well...yes and no—mainly no. Lara's still raiding tombs and solving grand puzzles but this game is decidedly organic in nature, because nature is the foundation for the action. The emphasis is on bringing Lara's world to life—a lush, vast interactive world that reacts and remembers. There isn't a clear indication of where you go next—exploration is paramount in the new scheme of things. Remember those massive environments from the first Tomb Raider when the gameplay was so fresh and new, where you had no idea what to do or how to do it? Well, that sense of awe is back, only tenfold, as the terrain has become a living part of the game. Everything you see is dynamic. It's pure woman versus wild. If Lara's negotiating a wet ledge she's more apt to slip or lose grip, and if she picks up a stick to use for leverage it becomes a physical part of the game. It's like one big physics smorgasbord. The lighting has also undergone major strides. Moving beyond dynamic lighting, Crystal employs a system that looks altogether photo-real. Watching Lara perform amidst blowing trees, torrential rain, thunder and lightning with the passing storm clouds overhead casting an indescribable glow, the sense of connection with the world was beyond compare—that unforgettable feeling of mystery that sends chills down your spine at an all-time high.

As far as the offensive itself goes Lara still draws her pistols, although there are very few armed foes in the new game—in favor of a more aggressive enemy, both human and otherwise. Rather than shooting first and asking questions later, the opposition is prone to attacking Lara head-on, putting her new melee skills to the test. Lara now uses direct combat and evasive maneuvers to distance herself from her attacker before her pistols are drawn on many occasions. Otherwise the environment is her adversary, and she's got the gear to give it a go. Don't look for conveniently placed health packs (the team isn't sure yet how Lara will heal) but endemic tools, acrobatics and gear are plentiful, including Lara's bike. No longer a transportation device, it's now a fully functional (better handling) part of her provisions to be used as a means to solve puzzles.

I was shown a single area of the game and came away completely awestruck. I can't imagine what the finished product will bring—so much is left to be explored—but I do know one thing: the Eidos of old that pushed games out the door whether they were ready or not is a thing of the past. Their new compound and executive branch are equally extraordinary. And I'm not just saying that because they promised me my own Lara mannequin.

As we transition from '07 to '08, gaming will continue to evolve through teams like Crystal that fight to innovate in ways you often times may not even notice. They're the backbone of the next-generation, and Tomb Raider 8 is but their first step down a long, glorious (real-time) road.

Tomb Raider: Underworld	
System(s)	PS3, 360
Developer	Crystal Dynamics
Publisher	Eidos
Available	TBA 2008

Lara's prone to slipping in wet conditions.

TOMB RAIDER 8

Interview

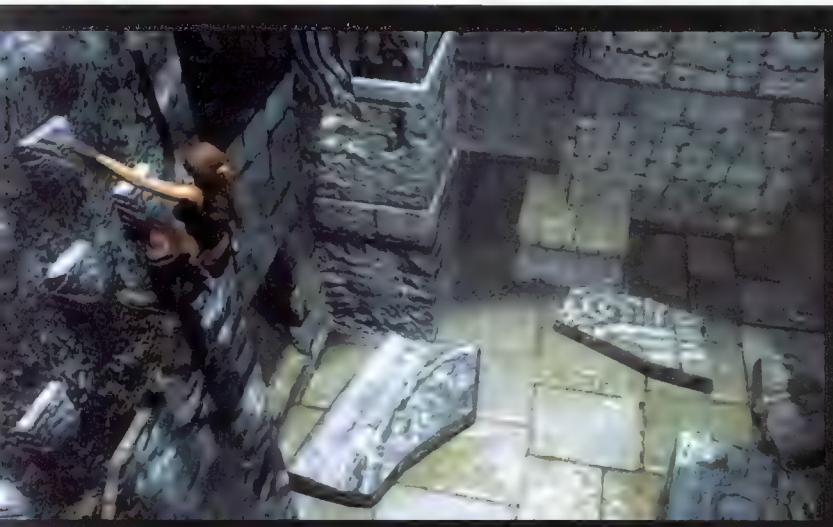
Crystal Dynamics Creative Director, Eric Lindstrom

"...players can expect a heightened level of realism to their immersion, but only in all the places where it's fun and rewarding."

Crystal has grown quite a bit since the days of Total Eclipse and Gex, becoming best known for the Kain and Soul Reaver series before Lara came along. How has obtaining this franchise changed Crystal as an organization?
Eric Lindstrom: Crystal Dynamics has always had a reputation for developing great games, especially in the third-person action-adventure genre, and we were excited to be able to bring our strengths to bear on an established industry icon when Lara Croft came to us. Everyone was very happy with the results, and the Tomb Raider franchise has become an important part of our continued ongoing success.

Throughout the development of Legend were you as a team already envisioning aspects of the framework ripe for enhancing/overhauling for the next-gen debut?
Absolutely. In making Tomb Raider: Legend, we created many more advancements than we could effectively bring into play, so we were already looking forward to how we would use our tools and techniques in spectacular ways on next-gen platforms.

Based on the gameplay I've seen thus far, I'd consider this a rebirth as much as a sequel. Are you approaching it as such?
We don't consider this to be a rebirth. Tomb Raider: Legend was Crystal Dynamic's rebirth of the franchise. However, we agree that this game feels like a pretty dramatic step forward. Next-gen capabilities have given us the ability



to take Lara and her world further than anyone could have expected, and by focusing all that power we have achieved something that feels very new and fresh but retains all the qualities that the fans find special about the game.

Crystal is already ahead of the game when it comes to dynamic collision. How will you take it to the next level? In what ways will Lara interact with the environment in totally new ways?
Lara will have the ability to grab moving objects and architectural elements more than ever, and with our animation blending system, she will do so in a way that is more fluid than you've ever seen. We are also taking the new step of leaving large-scale debris in the world—no more vanishing rubble in Tomb Raider.

Taking any character into a realistic organic setting has its obvious challenges; transitioning from video game rules to real-world rules. Will Lara only be able to carry a realistic number of items in her backpack? How will she heal? Are you going to do away with any interface altogether? How far are you taking the realistic nature of the game?
When we talk about realism on the team, we usually call it "grounding" because it isn't about avoiding the impossible in the real world, it's about taking people into a realm of the epic and fantastic in a way that doesn't break their suspension of disbelief. The most important role that realism plays in the game is to connect the player to the experience on an emotional level, not to replicate reality, which can sometimes even distance the player if adhered to too strictly. So players can expect a heightened level of realism to their immersion, but only in all the places where it's fun and rewarding.

So we'll still get mythological beasts and epic bosses...
Up on the surface, Lara will face real predatory animals that exist in the parts of the world she is exploring, but down in the underworlds she discovers, she will find plenty of creatures you won't find in any zoo.

"In the level where Lara explores Southern Mexico, she leaves footprints in the mud, but it's raining so they wash away. The bodies she leaves behind in combat encounters will stay, however, as will the debris from any destruction she causes."

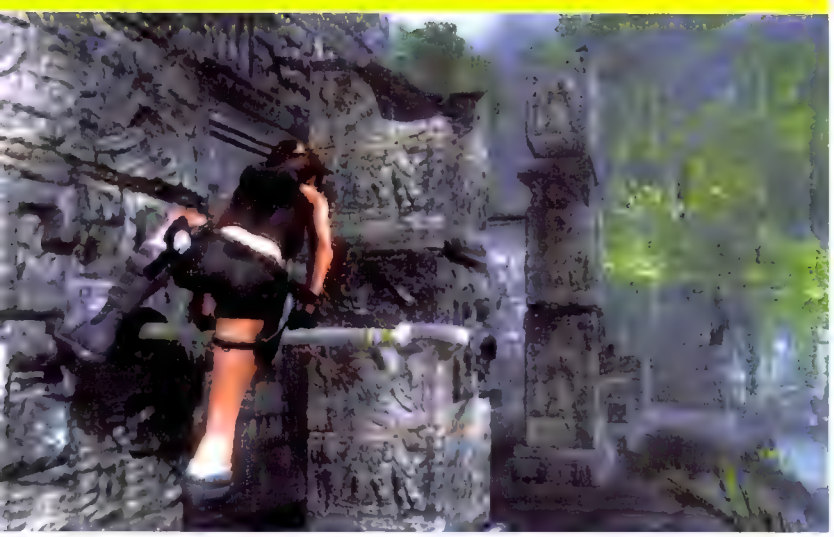
Regarding Lara herself, I noticed the smallish dimples above her derriere along with other never-before-seen nuances. Other than her leggy shape is she aesthetically a real woman?
Lara will come to life more vividly than ever, but realism wasn't as important to us as believability. We have worked very hard to find the perfect balance between realistic detail and the classic look of Lara Croft, and we are very pleased with the results.

Is this the first time you've used motion capture as your primary animation or did you use it in Legends?
This is the first time. We went to motion capture to bring a more natural fluidity to her movements, with proper weight and secondary motion. Again, the goal was to achieve a more amazing level of aesthetic detail more than the pursuit of realism for its own sake.

Will Lara's skin react to temperature?

"At the heart of all Tomb Raider game's is Lara's determination to solve ancient mysteries and we are definitely taking this to a new level."

Lara is completely dynamic to her environment, and vice-versa.



Will she sweat or get cold?
We are still working out the details, but Lara should sweat appropriately. This is part of the effort to ground her more in the world, which includes more powerful animations, vocalizations, and effects on her skin and clothing.

One of the coolest new refinements has to be the way water cascades down her skin and the way she gets muddy and/or wet, and then dries off realistically. Is this a product of your specific technology? I've never seen it done to such a degree.
The model for Lara Croft is a showcase of art and technology that we are very proud of. She has more than a dozen layers that determine her skin tone and texture, how light reflects or scatters, how shadows form, etc. We use these layers to not only make Lara look more amazing than ever, but we manipulate them in various ways to make her appear wet, sweaty, dirty, muddy, and more.

I've never seen lighting so true to nature either... What are you doing differently? Is dynamic lighting a relic of the past?
Relying heavily on real dynamic lights as many games are currently doing makes environments look stark and flat, with a lot of unrealistic hard edges. We developed a hybrid lighting model that combines dynamic lights with carefully created light maps to make our world look stunning in ways that none of the available methods could achieve alone.

I know that you can't divulge any story elements but can you explain how the game unfurls in terms of locales? Is it set in one massive region or will Lara take to globe hopping?
The adventure Lara pursues takes her around the world, where she discovers and explores the mythical underworlds of multiple ancient cultures.

What about vehicles? I've seen the (early) bike, but what other means of transport will she control?
Stay tuned!

You mentioned that there were very few armed enemies in the game. Does this mean that Lara will use her firearms less as well?
Hardly any of Lara's enemies will have guns but she will certainly need hers. Her quest takes her far from civilization, discovering ruins no one has ever seen before, so she has few encounters with armed humans. What she finds down in these underworlds are dangerous cryptids (creatures that are presumed extinct, or have yet to be discovered) and other guardians that aren't natural in origin, and many of them can take a lot of bullets before going down.

What types of melee abilities will she

posses? Will they evolve in any way or is Lara Lara?
Lara Croft is and continues to be a skilled combatant, and this will include gun play and melee abilities. Lara's physical attacks focus on repelling enemies so she can shoot them with less risk to herself. These skills are with her from the start, but as the player explores deeper into the underworlds, they become increasingly necessary to use and use skillfully.

Would you say that real-time set pieces—upon which no two players will interact with the terrain in quite the same way—is key to the evolution of this franchise...or for that matter, to the evolution of adventure gaming on the whole?
Giving players the opportunity to participate as much as possible in defining their experience is very important for Tomb Raider and games in general, and this is not restricted to picking different paths. Choices are important as they allow the player to identify more closely with the character they are playing. By choosing the way they approach the world and its situations, whether by choosing clothes, preferred weapon type, or relying on one gear item more than another, players connect more with their experience.

How far can you take it? Will Lara leave footprints that stay and dry in the mud? Are we at that level? Give us some examples of a dynamic environment.
We are committed to making Lara's effects on her world as persistent as possible in the ways that are most meaningful. In the level where Lara explores Southern Mexico, she leaves footprints in the mud, but it's raining so they wash away. The bodies she leaves behind in combat encounters will stay, however, as will the debris from any destruction she causes. Not only is it important to leave the wreckage of her actions in place to make the world come alive, they serve as valuable markers for where the player has been, so they can properly orient themselves in the worlds they explore.

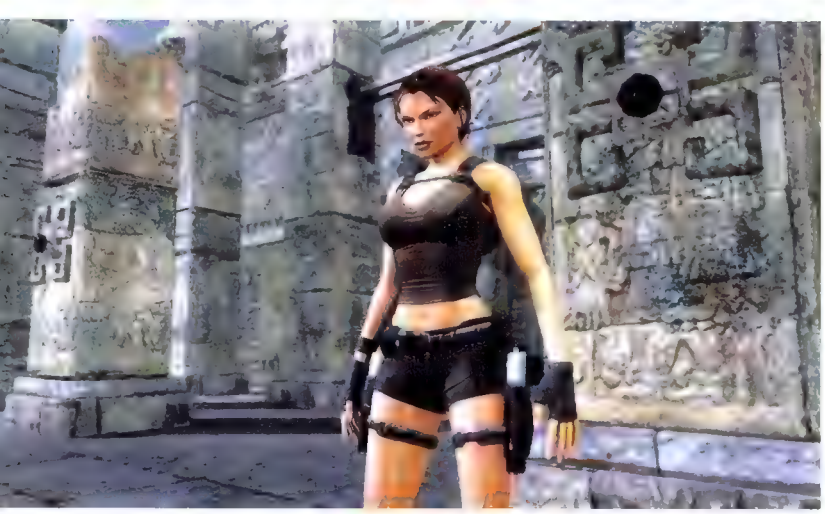
We've seen how Lara can affect the environment but how will the environment affect her? Will she be subjected to any natural occurrences that translate into gameplay?
Lara will get wet and gradually dry off; she will get dirty or muddy depending on her environment, but she can also wash herself clean by jumping into water or standing in the rain. Enemies with powerful attacks can knock her to the ground. The architecture she climbs and even the ground beneath her feet can move or give way, causing her to fall or slide and jump to save herself. Another example is when she runs through foliage: she raises her arms to shield her face.

Does the next Tomb Raider take place

post-Legend? What's the timeline?
Lara's adventure does take place after the events of *Tomb Raider: Legend*. Her adventure will be a thrill ride for anyone new to the franchise, and longtime fans will have plenty to talk about concerning their own experiences with Lara Croft in the past.

In terms of gameplay is it fair to say that this is a return to the exploration and puzzle solving of the original, only much deeper and sophisticated?
At the heart of all Tomb Raider game's is Lara's determination to solve ancient mysteries and we are definitely taking this to a new level. One part of this is of course exploration and puzzles, but there are many other important elements of the game that we are giving the same focus and attention. However, having said that, yes, our new approach to exploration and puzzle solving will create a much deeper experience. Rather than solving a string of local puzzles to get to the next room, the underworlds Lara discovers have large-scale mechanisms and challenges that span the entire environment. Players explore to find and understand the relationships and meaning of elements across the level, and then bring it all together to get the result they are after.

Toby keeps a careful eye on the line between sexy and trashy. How is this being handled given the authenticity of such a detailed new model?
Our belief has always been that Lara is sexy because she is beautiful, strong, skilled, stylish, and confident. Once those elements are established, overtly sexual elements of any kind, be they physical or behavioral, actually detract from Lara's attractiveness. Lara will have realistic secondary motion throughout her model as she moves, but along with everything else from her clothing choices to her tone of voice, only as a way of supporting those core elements of Lara's appeal. The result on the whole is really compelling.



How many costume changes will Lara undergo? Will there be any unlockables for replay's sake?
Lara will have a good number of different outfits to wear, both during the first playthrough and more for replays. We have an array of unlockables planned.

How will the music figure into the adventure? Are you employing a symphony? Will it be dynamic?
The score is sometimes symphonic, but other times it's ambient sound effects that are carefully orchestrated to create an emotion or mood. Whether it's melodic wind whistling through the caves, or the distant thrum of an underground pool of water, sound design is a critical ingredient to the Tomb Raider experience.

How about cut scenes? All in-engine? Is there a lot of dialogue?
The entire game experience is in-engine.

Will you be emphasizing Lara's expression and lip synchronicity?
Lara Croft is now fully next-gen, and you will see extremely high-quality facial expressions and lip synch.

Will Keeley Hawes reprise her role as Lara?
We are very pleased to say that Keeley is the voice of Lara Croft for this adventure.

Although the 360 is a powerhouse, there's no denying that the PS3 is a vast untapped platform. Games that make deft use of the cells—Uncharted, Heavenly Sword, MotorStorm—possess a quality that sets them apart. Will the PS3 version make use of the cells to appear superior in any way or will the two versions be identical?
We are simultaneously developing the game on both consoles in order to maximize the expression of the game on each.

During the demo one aspect I appreciated (among everything else) was the lack of prodding... No arrows, on-screen hints or prompts of any kind—just Lara versus the terrain. Are you going HUD and hint free? Or is it something that can be turned on and off?
We definitely want to intrude as little as possible into the player experience, so our goal is to minimize HUD and metagame graphics. But as with the rest of our design philosophy, the goal is not to mirror reality, but to facilitate the player's emotional connection to the world. Sometimes omitting a HUD element forces players to seek the information they want

in ways that break the illusion even more than a screen overlay. We are still working on the final mix.

How long a game are you shooting for? Or does it depend on how you play? Based on what I saw I know I'll be stopping often to soak in the sights.
The length of the game will depend more than ever on play style, given the different possibilities and optional exploration rewards. What also makes the playtime hard to predict is that the process of exploring and solving various challenges the first time will last significantly longer than subsequent replays.

You guys have always excelled in the area of architecture and texturing but the these environments appear as if you're taking matters beyond normal mapping and actually hand crafting much of the ruins. How are you achieving such a natural look?
We are approaching the environment as though it were one of Lara's fiercest adversaries in the game so it is getting

There aren't as many human enemies in the new game, but they're smarter than ever.

TOMB RAIDER

"We developed a hybrid lighting model that combines dynamic lights with carefully created light maps to make our world look stunning in ways that none of the available methods could achieve alone."

an extreme amount of attention, both technically and artistically. We also sent photographers on location who took thousands of reference photos, so the architectural forms in the game are not only correct, many of them use actual photographs as a basis for the materials. This was done not just to make our Mayan ruins authentic, but also because reality gives you source material that is highly detailed and inventive right at the start.

What type of research went into sculpting the TR8 universe?
A lot of thought and effort is going into the creation of Lara's coming adventure. We spent time researching myth, cryptids, ancient machines, and other elements related to the story. We also sent photographers to other continents to capture everything from architecture to flora. Again, making things realistic is good to some degree, but we also knew that by letting the real world do a lot of the work of creating things up front, we could focus our imaginations on adding to it and getting that much more into the game.

Is there a central "bad guy" or is Lara up against something omnipotent?
It's safe to say that what Lara is up against is unlike anything she's done before.

So, how's Gex for Wii coming along?
No comment.

Balancing and physics play a huge role this time out.

THE NEW 2008 xB.

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☐ HOT
☐ NOT

Devil May Cry 4

The devil is in the details

Interview

Hiroyuki Kobayashi, Producer, Devil May Cry 4

Play: I've always liked the name Devil May Cry. Where did that come from?
Hiroyuki Kobayashi: It carries really two meanings. Dante himself is so frightening that he puts the fear of gods in demons to the extent that they will cry. At one stage—and I can't quite remember exactly—but Dante himself is crying, I believe at the end of Devil May Cry 3. That's pretty much the basic reason.

As far as Dante as a character, it's hard to imagine the game without him. Did you ever seriously consider crafting the whole game around Nero and leaving Dante out?
Yes, we always had the idea that you would be playing with Dante. We were always going to do it. But the reason the announcement was made in the way that it was, instead of stating Dante's presence from the start, there would be too much focus on the character; it's what everyone's expecting. But I wanted more of the initial focus on Nero. But definitely, we always wanted Dante there.

Devil May Cry likes it a bit over-the-top. Are you taking that style to even more extremes here? I've seen some pretty crazy stuff.
These games have always had a balance between the cool action stuff and the sexy stuff and comic-book influences; it's always been a combination between all of those. This is what the series fans expect, so especially with the Dante sections, there will be a lot of that stuff there. But actually for Nero, because he is still young, there will be a little bit of a different direction in the way he's presented. He's a little more single-minded, a little more focused. Dante is wisecracking, almost looking like a slacker at times. But the contrast between the young Nero and veteran Dante is being explored. It's one of the interesting things about the game.

Are you designing Devil May Cry 4 with any more of a western mindset than previous titles in the series? Capcom has been increasingly vocal about reaching that expanded audience.
Well, one area we're really paying attention to is that our characters aren't Japanese. We pay especial attention to the lines they are speaking, that what they're saying isn't too weird, that their body language isn't something that only Japanese people will understand. In terms of the game and storyline itself, we don't really pay much attention to... we really just make the game

Can't wait much longer for Devil May Cry 4? Looking forward to unleashing the fury of the devil into the wicked hearts of demons? Well, don't cry, because this interview with producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi will hold you over until the game is yours in February.

Devil May Cry 4	
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	February

we want to make.

The last three games were on PS2. How exactly do you see the new technology impacting the game?
Yeah, there are a lot of things we can do now that we just couldn't do properly before. Nero's devilbringer... changing between Dante's different styles in real time, the cool new weapons he has. There are some things we simply couldn't fit on the PS2. Another thing is that we can create stages that are much wider, much larger and obviously have much more vivid backgrounds to them

Would you compare Devil May Cry 4 more closely to any particular past game in the series?
Well, given that this is a sequel to Devil May Cry 3, it does have a lot of similar elements that were in 3. To a certain extent, that's the closest one. At the same time, having Nero, the impact of a new character, the impact might be more like the first time you played Devil May Cry. I guess I kind of see this game as going off the base of Devil May Cry 3 with the impact of the first game.

With the difficulty balance, does that come down to an instinct, do you have to feel out the sweet spot?
We don't do focus testing or anything like that specifically. We do have other teams at Capcom who are working on other games apart from Devil May Cry, and we do get their opinion on the game. We do like to listen to what others have to say, what the press thinks after they play it. But at the end of the day, it's up to us, it's our policy and our concept to make the game we want to make.

Give me one thing nobody knows about Devil May Cry 4.
[Laughs] I'm not sure if anyone really knows this... So there's me, I'm the director on the team, but actually when the development started it was supposed to be other people working on the game.

"But at the end of the day, it's up to us, it's our policy and our concept to make the game we want to make."

You can run but you can't hide...

ノーモア★ヒーローズ

NO MORE HEROES

Hero worship

words Dave Halverson

Resident Otaku and ex-masked-wrestler Travis Touchdown got shit-faced in a local bar and ended up assassinating a local hit man—all in the name of scoring with a smoking-hot babe—making him the number 11 most renowned assassin in Santa Destroy. He never did score (with her) although he did manage to catch the eye of the organization she represents, a pay-per-kill service putting out contracts on the remaining 10 assassins of Santa Destroy. Fortunately for us Travis has nothing better to do, plus he really digs the beam katana she laid on him and the cash, not to mention her. And so in Sylvia we trust; time to do some serious killin'.

Before we begin, let me say this: if Quentin Tarantino were to experience this game front to back, I 100% guarantee that it would be his next film. No More Heroes goes far beyond the bizarre style laid down in Killer 7, crossing over into a kung-fu-theatre-meets-film-noir blood bath on a GTA chassis…albeit a scaled down one with a level of artistic prowess that series will never even rub up against.

The hub for the game is Travis' apartment where you can mess with the cat, pop in a video, change clothes, raid the fridge, check your messages, save and so on. Saving, by the way, is always done on the crapper. And not alluded to; he unzips, pulls down, and squats before reams of toilet paper cover the screen. You want avant-garde? This game manufactures it. Leaving his humble Otaku abode Travis jumps onto his massive bike to make his way to the next kill after which he becomes the number 10 assassin in Santa Destroy and the game's master plan begins to unfurl. In order for Travis to keep going, to keep on killing, he must pay an entry fee—via ATM—for the next mark and so it's off to work he goes. Jobs range from quick assassinations to coconut collection, trash picker, lawn mowing…you name it. Travis begins the game as a "third rater," so he has to take what he can get. Once he's stockpiled enough money he can head to the next level (each assassin is guarded by a posse Crackdown-style) or stop in at a local retailer as more and more open as he assails in rank. He can stop by Beefhead Video (gotta return Big German Jugs Collection 23 anyway) and pick up some new tapes to master new wrestling moves; pop into Area 51 for the latest fashions, or hit the gym where a series of iron-pumping minigames raise his attributes. Once you've satisfied your shopping needs it's back to the hotel where Sylvia's message awaits…time once again for the kill. Each blood-soaked assassination scenario in NMH is more surreal than the last as Travis makes his way to each inevitable showdown before which your Wiimote will actually ring… Put it up to your ear and there she is—Sylvia, usually telling you how much she's going to enjoy watching you die. The first time I answered my Wiimote

was, for me, the finest Wii moment yet.

The control in NMH is, in a word, perfect, as it pertains to the implementation of the Wiimote and Nunchuk. This is what Wii gaming was supposed to be all about—system-exclusive games that play like nothing else. Pressing A swings the beam katana, weakening the enemy which brings up a directional cue. This determines which way you will slice…chop off the head, cut 'em in half, or use a wrestling move followed by a pierce through the heart—all of which produce a blood-and-coin gusher. I laughed…I cried with joy. I love this game. The showdowns themselves are so exceedingly, tremendously, incalculably cool that we're seriously not worthy.

Santa Destroy itself ain't too shabby either… Don't look for lots of traffic or pedestrians mulling about; this is a Wii game we're talking about, but do look for a stylized sun-drenched playground full of freaks and peculiar destinations. The first pinhead who faults this game for its look ought to be sentenced to repeat viewings of *Dancing With the Stars* in-between electric shock therapy directly to the nether regions. The game is also embroidered with enough 8-bit accoutrements to bring a tear to just about any gamer's eye, especially the ranking list screen. The first truly revolutionary third-party Wii experience is almost upon us. What remains to be seen is if there are any more like it in the near enough future.

Sweet Sylvia. Always dressed for the occasion.

No More Heroes	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Grasshopper Manufacture
Publisher	Ignition
Online/Multi	No
Available	January 2008

INTERVIEW

An interview with Grasshopper President Goichi Suda, aka Suda 51

As the game opens Travis trots down the stairs whistling the NMH theme, and you know you're in Grasshopper territory… Once again you've shattered traditional barriers with your unabashedly in-your-face scenario. But this one is your wildest yet. What inspired Travis Touchdown as a character?

Goichi Suda: First, I'd like to thank you for your kind comments. For the look, I wanted Travis to look like Johnny Knoxville from *Jackass*, as I'm a big fan of this show. But I also had Josh Barnett in mind; he is a famous professional fighter and has won many different fighting tournaments, but is also famous because of his passion for Japanese anime. I wanted to re-create Josh Barnett's success story in No More Heroes and that's why Travis is a big Japanese anime otaku and likes wrestling or fighting sports such as the UFC, WWE, TNA or the Japanese UWF. But here, he is fighting to become the number one assassin.

Returning home from my first mission—that was a gorgeous setting for a kill, overlooking the coast of Santa Destroy at Death Metal's place—the first thing I did was switch on the TV where I found a sublime music video—the first of many programs I'll be stockpiling. What an amazing video. Was that produced for the game? What an amazing way to begin the game.

The video clip you see in Travis' room is a song called "Heavenly Star" composed by Genki Rocket. It was produced by the game designer, Tetsuya Mizuguchi. This collaboration was born after [Tetsuya Mizuguchi and I] met during E3. We found out that we had a lot in common and got along really well, so he gave me the authorization to use this song in the game.

As much as I love everything about this game—your best yet—it's the small details that make it such a treasure, such as the retro/8-bit touches and disregard for traditional gameplay devices. The first time the Wiimote rang and I put it up to my ear to receive intelligence, it felt like I was playing the Wii for the first time. Grasshopper doesn't play by any rules. You seem to make up your own, which is extremely rare these days. Where does this flamboyant style come from?

What you said really made my day. At the time of this interview (November 20), No More Heroes has not been released in Japan and there are very few comments about the game. So I'm still really anxious but at the same time, I still have high expectations. That's why reading your comments really made me feel happy. When Grasshopper was established, we already had this sense of style. But I think I acquired the punk attitude when

This is how Travis rolls...

I worked on my second title, Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special, at Human.

Setting out to create an open-world pseudo-GTA type of game (not to compare; there is no compare in my book—you win) why did you select the Wii as your platform? Given its inferior tech and mostly young and or casual base, why not really go for broke on 360 or PS3? If this game was on next-gen console it would be the new king of the genre hands down. For me it still is, but I can't help but wonder: why the Wii?
The main reason why No More Heroes was developed on the Wii was the analogy between the beam katana and Wii remote. Of course I thought about developing No More Heroes on next-gen platforms, but if you look at how few original action games you have on the Wii, I think that developing No More Heroes on the Wii was a good decision. But, thinking about Travis going berserk on next-gen platforms would definitely kick ass. Maybe one day it will happen.

Your melee combat controls are by far the best yet. Not only does the system work perfectly but the kills are just so satisfying, especially the more complex duels where dodging and deft timing come into play. I think you've also set a new benchmark for blood showers. How difficult is it to implement a fighting system like this on the Wiimote and Nunchuk? Is there a lot of trial and error?
Thank you again! I actually think that the combat control system is solid enough to satisfy players who are looking for a real action game on the Wii. From the early concept stage, we had to adjust the control scheme many times before achieving what we have now. Then once we had the basis of this control scheme, we had to go through another trial and error process until we were sure that the players would take pleasure in grabbing the Wii remote the way we designed it to be used.

Even though you are on the Wii, you're making it do things we never thought it could—freely navigating a fairly large open city. How much of a challenge was it juggling size and detail? The bigger you go the more detail you lose right? Did you consider loading sections of the city at a time?
Even though Santa Destroy is open from the very beginning, we had to segment the city. We knew we couldn't make a city as big as the ones you find in GTA but the idea was to have at least a decent sized city, located on the West Coast. But I actually owe a big one to the graphic staff, as they did a great job in creating Santa Destroy.

One of the things you've become known for is your writing and cinematography. You are artist first it seems, painting your games onto interactive canvases. Your style is slightly reminiscent of Guy Ritchie or Quentin Tarantino. Are you at all influenced by cinema? Who is Suda-51?
Thank you again. I love Guy Ritchie and Quentin Tarantino's movies and though video games and movies are two different worlds, when it comes to the work of the artist we face the same problem: how to innovate and keep things exciting in a world where everything goes so fast; this is especially true in the video game industry. I don't want to fall short against Quentin Tarantino or Guy Ritchie in terms of extremeness or innovation, so I'm ready to be even more extreme than they have been so far. No More Heroes was influenced by the movie *El Topo*. When I was kid, I watched a lot of movies from the New Hollywood era and I think it really touched me. That's why each year when I go to E3 I want to make a game that takes place on the West Coast. Who is Suda51? Just someone who loves wrestling, rock music, movies, anime and video games, of course.

The music is also simply sublime. It's also incredibly varied. Is this all in-house?
All Grasshopper titles' BGM were done in-house by our sound director, Takada Masafumi. I've worked with Takada since I was at Human, so it's really easy to work with him. You just give him the game concept and let him do the rest.

I've been following NMH for over a year, nagging US publishers to bring it stateside. What took so long?

"For the look, I wanted Travis to look like Johnny Knoxville from Jackass, as I'm a big fan of this show."

This is easily the premier third-party game on the Wii. Was the violence an issue in finding a publisher?
Thank you very much for following our title since day one.
Marvelous Entertainment (the Japanese publisher of No More Heroes) did all the negotiations with U.S. publishers. I wanted to find a publisher quickly but they wanted to find the best partner for the U.S. release and I think it paid off. We couldn't have made a better choice than working with Ubisoft.
The violence wasn't an issue at all. Actually, we were approached by several publishers that were really enthusiastic about No More Heroes.

Well, you can't do better than Ubisoft. Have you discussed the option of making this one of their franchises? I know you've never done one but c'mon, this is opportunity knocking. This is GTA for punks!! We need a series!!
Really? You think it could be a good series? It would be really cool actually, so please everyone send requests to Ubisoft!
I really like Travis and even though I don't know how yet, you can be sure that Travis will come back.

I've dispensed the first two assassins rather quickly. Does the plot thicken? Is there more do between contracts as the game wears on? Are we in for 20 hours or so of this madness?
The difficulty increases from the eighth assassin, once all the basic techniques are mastered.
Regarding the plot, each assassin has his/her own personality and story.
Between contracts, there are sub-missions that you do to earn money for the next contract. They are divided into two types of missions: smaller assassination missions and part-time jobs.
There are actually more than 20 hours of gameplay if you try to gather all the items scattered in Santa Destroy and do all the sub-missions. If you are just trying to become the number one assassin, it should take you a dozen hours.

It seems like there's a lot to purchase and collect in the game. How interactive is Santa Destroy?
Santa Destroy is a cool place to visit on your bike.
There are many shops where you can purchase items such as new clothes; you can upgrade your beam katana by visiting Naomi's lab; you can rent video tapes at Bishop's rental store to learn new wrestling moves. And all the missions and submissions take place in Santa Destroy.

The game is rated M for obvious reasons in terms of violence, but what about sexuality? Do you push that envelope too?
Well, the sexual content is more subtle, but during the game, Travis does try to score with Sylvia, so who knows...

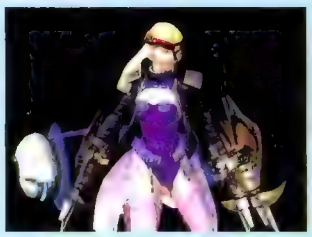
Well, I must go finish the game now, thank you for granting me this short reprieve and for the best third-party Wii game yet. I'm having too much fun for words. You are the kings of avant-garde gaming.
Thank you very much for your support and comments about No More Heroes.
I hope you will finish it since the ending is pretty exciting.
I read your comments to my staff and they were also really happy.
Thank you again for all those kind words and I hope that No More Heroes will be a huge success in the U.S.

I better get a date with Sylvia when this is all over.
Actually, at the end Sylvia starts to take her clothes off... To be continued!

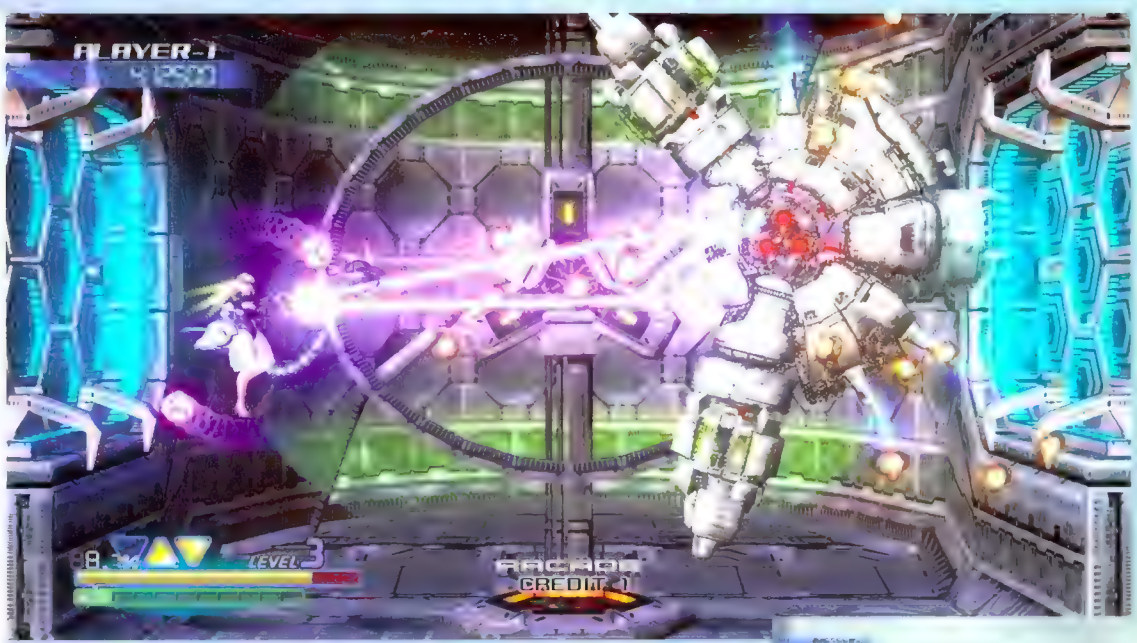
"Of course I thought about developing No More Heroes on next-gen platforms, but if you look at how few original action games you have on the Wii, I think that developing No More Heroes on the Wii was a good decision."

Hang on! This is my favorite T-shirt!

Omega 5



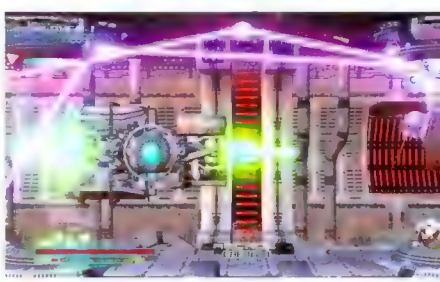
words Dave Halverson



Although the soon-to-be-released XBLA shooter Omega 5 (from Natsume via Hudson—be there) is considered "old-school," it is by play mechanics only. This game is in no way a throwback to those dusty shooters of old but rather a big glossy next-gen powerhouse—the first XBLA game to truly take advantage of the new 250MB capacity, like a Neo-Geo game on steroids. The game plays like a mixture of Forgotten Worlds and R-Type, although it goes much further in terms of how each character's orbiting pod and main attack mechanism work. Firing or using your beam is assigned to the left analog with the R trigger designated to manipulating your pod. Simply pointing your attack sans button pounding is truly a joy (especially for those of us with residual thumb damage from the '80s and '90s) and the ability to discharge much of the enemy's incoming fire along with easy-to-discern enemy rounds—a by-product of the game's glossy next-gen texture—means zero frustration. I've also come to appreciate the ability to graze the backgrounds without being blown to bits.

Who needs that headache when you're dodging massive armadas? Everything about Omega 5 is BIG. The characters—which are gloriously modeled—are big; incoming fire is big, smallish ships are big. Pretty much anything that doesn't squirt out of a larger vessel is bigger than a Volkswagen. Above all Omega 5 is absolutely beautiful. It's also extremely challenging; albeit doable. Now that they can fill the screen with highly detailed unidentified flying anythings, Natsume seems to be bent on payback for all of those slow-down and flicker episodes of yesteryear. I can only imagine how big the bosses must get...

I was only allowed access to one level so there's not that much more to say; a review will have to wait until a later date, but to say that playing Omega 5 felt good would be a gross (to the point of projectile shrimp and yogurt vomit) understatement. Games like this that next-gen-ize the great shooters and action games of the '90s are what PSN and XBLA are made for, or at least what I'd hoped they were made for. I've played enough old games—you can have 'em. 90% suck by today's standards. In with the new I say.



System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Natsume
Publisher	Hudson
Available	Q1 2008

Get your stinking paws off me, you turd.

Unless, of course, you know the CODE.

Because if you get the CODES that are ONLY available in the new *MapleStory* iTrading Card Game (iTCG™), then you're cool. As in, not a turd. Use the codes found on cards to unlock some exclusive virtual quests in the *MapleStory* online game, get unique artifacts and collect rare pets (black bunnies are the new black, y'know). There's a code in every pack.

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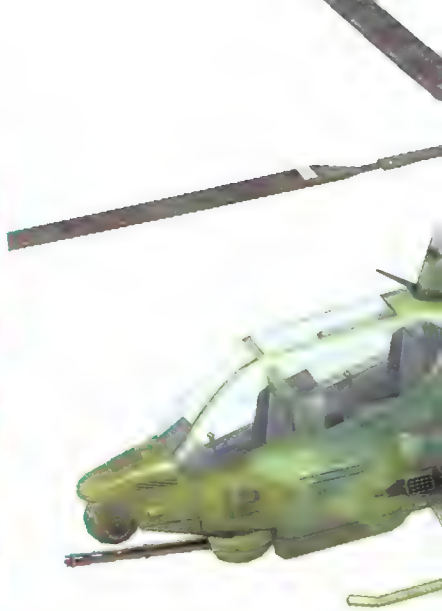
MERCENARIES 2

Way of the Gun

WORLD IN FLAMES



words Greg Orlando

Venezuela will burn, Pandemic Studios promises.

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames puts Pandemic's guns for hire right in the middle of a conflagration in Hugo Chavez' oil-rich nation. It's a premise ripe with controversy, and a wonderful opportunity for Pandemic to move its Mercenaries franchise (last seen on Xbox and PlayStation 2 in Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction) onto the next generation of game consoles. World in Flames, which features open world, third-person adventure and almost wholly destructible environments, is bound for the PlayStation 2 yet again, but also the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC.

With Mercenaries 2 set for release in early 2008, Play thought it appropriate to use the calm before the storm, as it were, to check in with Jonathan Zamkoff, senior producer for Mercenaries 2: World in Flames.

Oh, and for the record, Mercenaries 2: World in Flames does include online cooperative play.

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Pandemic Studios
Publisher	Electronic Arts
Available	Q1 2008

INTERVIEW

Jonathan Zamkoff, Senior Producer

play: Your choice of setting for World in Flames has stirred some controversy. How are you addressing this?

Jonathan Zamkoff: For the most part, we aren't. We've been saying since day one that we're not trying to make a war simulation game, we're not trying to take place in current day Venezuela, and we're not using real political figures. This game is an over-the-top summer action flick that you control, and it has to be set somewhere.

The truth of the matter is our director, Cameron Brown, is very well-read and has crazy theories about how global events could play out. Since Venezuela is an oil-rich nation in the midst of humanity's real-world thirst for black gold, it makes an excellent backdrop for an action game about mercenaries.

But we have nothing against the people of Venezuela and hope everyone can see this game for what it is: a piece of fictional entertainment about blowing s**t up!

Describe some of the warring factions in World in Flames and tell us a little about what they have to offer for aspiring mercenaries?

This time around we have five key factions that you'll be working with, for, or against. They are: Universal Petroleum: UP represents big oil and is in Venezuela strictly for the profit. Once Solano takes over and begins nationalizing the oil supply, UP is forced to watch its stock price plummet. UP needs your help to get rid of Solano and return the oil back into the hands of the profiteers.

The PLAV (Peoples Liberation Army of Venezuela): These are the guerillas who realize that Solano is not really a man of the people. They want the massive oil profits being generated in Venezuela to be spread amongst the poor. The PLAV hate UP and Solano equally.

The Pirates: These are a band of roving black-market smugglers who run headfirst into a conflict when a normal person would run the opposite direction in terror. These guys rock – their HQ is like Disneyland on crack, complete with blaring Reggaeton and tons of smuggled arms. Anytime you need a change of pace, a cool vehicle or weapon, or need to pawn off some goods, go see the pirates, they'll have something for you.

The Allied Nations: Represents the major Western superpowers. It needs this oil to keep its economies churning, and no deranged dictator is going to cut off the flow.

The Chinese: Emerging as a world superpower with a tremendous thirst for energy, the Chinese, just like the West, are not going to watch a major supplier change the rules of the game. They mean business, and not even the West is going to get in their way.

"...we have nothing against the people of Venezuela and hope everyone can see this game for what it is: a piece of fictional entertainment about blowing s**t up!"

Welcome to Mercenary airlines...

"Anytime you need a change of pace, a cool vehicle or weapon, or need to pawn off some goods, go see the pirates, they'll have something for you."

Will there be shifts in power among the factions? If so, how does the game handle this?
The story will unfold with the factions struggling against each other, and, as the world's most-dangerous mercenary, you are enough to tip the tide of the battle. In fact, in Act II your actions will play a major role in the conflict between the Allies and the Chinese.

How does building your own stable of mercenaries work within the game?
Throughout the critical path of the game, there will be contracts where you meet and eventually recruit other mercs. These mercs provide you with the ability to call in support and air strikes, and they give you the tools you'll need to eventually track down and defeat Solano. It's very cool, because, even though they provide ancillary support, you'll be able to go back to your PMC and see them walking around in their own sections of the base. You'll even be able to wager against them in a variety of offbeat jobs back at the PMC.

Alternately, what can you do with a stable of mercenaries?
Unleash the fury of all the cool stuff you collect, as well as buy, steal, and earn in the game. And bet them in a whole suite of cool side missions. They may even make you wear a funny famous Pandemic costume over lost challenges, but you'll have to see that for yourself.

Describe some of the new weaponry and tools included within World in Flames.
Where do I begin? Fuel air bombs, attack boats, a grappling hook, missile racked assault buggies, off-road motorcycles, emplaced grenade launchers. There are close to 200 vehicles, dozens of air strikes, a ton of weapons ranging from small arms to RPGs. Let's put it this way: you'll never find yourself walking around for long without some way to destroy a foe, a tank, or even a 75-story skyscraper.

What's the most awesome stunt you've seen pulled off during gameplay?
I've attached a sticky beacon onto an

Now this girl knows how to party.

enemy's vehicle and watched him drive (unknowingly) into his base where a massive cruise missile homed in on the beacon and destroyed a 100-meter swath of soldiers. And then there was the time I winched an oil tanker with my chopper, swung it up in front of me like a pendulum, and blasted it out of the air with hellfire missiles. The flaming wreckage crashed to the ground and set the canopy below on fire. It was insane.

It seems that most of the scenarios involving internal war within Venezuela would all have fairly negative outcomes. Can you tell us how you're going about conceiving the game's conclusion(s) and the ultimate resolution(s)?
I don't want to delve into the conclusion of the game, but we're really happy with how the story of this game came together. Story was not something we executed on as well as we would have liked on the first Mercenaries, but this time around I think we nailed it—with the just the right amount of cheese.

Just how destructible is the world of World in Flames?
Every. Single. Thing. The only thing that can't be destroyed is the ground you walk on.

Fire plays a big part in the proceedings. What's the secret to using fire as your friend and avoiding its pitfalls as your foe?
Burning down impenetrable canopies can provide for a major strategic advantage against a base full of enemies. Additionally, thick smoke from fires can block an AI's line of sight, and he certainly won't enjoy being on the receiving end of a fuel air bomb.

What's the one feature you're most proud of in the game?
The scope of our cities, and the fact that everything (buildings, benches, trees, overpasses, etc.) is destructible is a major technological achievement and speaks volumes to our artists' and programmers' vision and abilities. I've never seen anything like the scope of destruction in Mercenaries 2, let alone an open-world fully streamed sandbox game.

Can you tell us anything about the mysterious new mercenary who will be the game's fourth playable character?
She's no longer a playable character, but she will definitely show up to lend a hand.

Do you think we missed anything? Or is there anything you'd care to add?
You guys pretty much nailed it all; in fact I think I need to take a nap after this interview. But seriously, Mercenaries 2 is really a unique and, I believe, a masterpiece interactive experience. The scale and scope of the world, the humor, the action, the multiplayer (I guess you missed that part)—this game is going to rock the gaming world when it hits the shelves. It has been a lot of work, but the team is an absolute pleasure to work with. The day the game comes out, all of the late nights are going to be worth it.

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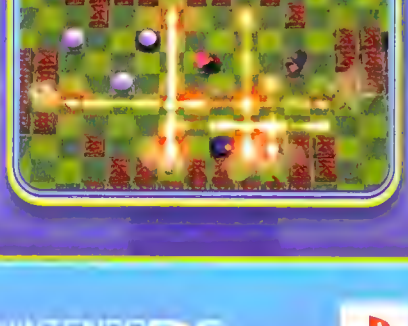

MINI GAMES GALORE

All Screens Shown

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief

Wii NINTENDO DS PSP

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Destroy All Humans
Big Willy Unleashed

Unleash your inner Willy

words Heather Campbell

Destroy All Humans is one of those games that you either loved … or it just didn't register on your radar. The original PS2 title (released in 2005) has already spawned a sequel, which means that Big Willy Unleashed is the third in what must be a fairly successful series. And what makes the games work is still in full effect. It's not the graphics, it's not some new-fangled game-play. It's the sensibility that drives Destroy All Humans.

What do I mean by sensibility? Well, in the latest chapter, aliens have landed in the 1970's. Determined to take over the world and collect DNA matter, they open up a fast-food joint modeled after Big Boy. Only they call it Big Willy. The malicious extraterrestrials fashion the meat from people (It's Made of People!!), which means that they have less clean-up to take care of after a run around town. The hero (villain?) speaks like Jack Nicholson, and is very sensitive about his genitalia … and also owns the aforementioned restaurant. Hence the sur-title of the game, Big Willy Unleashed. Get it? Don't worry, that's not the last time you'll get a sophomoric kick out of Destroy All Humans.

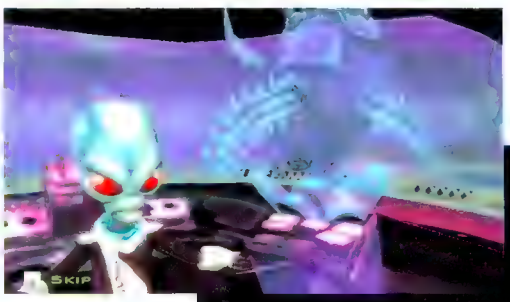
Destroy All Humans: Big Willy Unleashed plays in a mission-based sandbox style, but unlike the traditional weaponry of, say, Grand Theft Auto games, Big Willy Unleashed has a suitcase full of silly sci-fi gadgets including zombie guns (which, er, make Zombies out of people), anal probes, and straight up good ol' fashioned 'lectricity.

"You're probably looking forward to controlling a giant Big Boy statue and running around town burping and farting."

As of now, the control is extremely sensitive, and more than a little difficult to adapt to. Pointing the IR-equipped Wiimote at the screen to control your camera isn't very accurate, and using combos of buttons with wrist-flicks to grab and throw objects is just clumsy. With a bit of development time left, there's a good chance this will be tightened up, but the graphics are likely to remain basic last-gen stuff.

Still, you're probably not playing Destroy All Humans to show off your processors. You'd doing it for the comedic sci-fi references and silly bathroom antics. You're probably looking forward to controlling a giant Big Boy statue and running around town burping and farting. Ain't nothing wrong with that.

Destroy All Humans Big Willy Unleashed	
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Locomotive Games
Publisher	THQ
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	March 4, 2008



Monster Madness

Sticks and stones won't break their bones so use a chainsaw

words Dave Halverson

Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia was no big deal. Artificial Minds was toiling away on the 360 version before the console launched, yet it didn't find a home until Southpeak stepped up and adopted it for a modest June '07 release. To call it an anti-blockbuster would be an understatement. There wasn't even a band wagon to jump on beyond the tireless coverage from yours truly (I do love an underdog, especially when it sports rotting Chihuahuas). But that doesn't change the fact that it's a gleefully original and extremely fun take on a tried and true (albeit dated) formula—the top-down action/shooter, of which it is now the sole survivor on next-gen console. I think Southpeak would have been better served with a lower price point but at least they proved that a little game can still eek its way onto store shelves. Shooting zombie hordes is certainly nothing new but its Monster Madness' presentation that makes it shine, from its bumbling caricatures of nerd, Goth chick, surf dude, and bimbo to its ultra twisted zombie hordes and ingenious tools of destruction. You may have been down this road before, but never carrying a CD launcher fashioned out of a bike frame or locked and loaded with dual nail guns while wearing Bouncy Shoes. There are vehicles too, including a swan boat, sand rail, UFO and mechs fashioned out of old VW's... that's just cool. And now it's headed to PS3 (via Psyonix) with 16 new character costumes, redesigned levels, and no less than 10 new mini-games in tow. They're also dousing some of the 360 game's warts and adding reconfigurable controls. So tell a friend...or an enemy: the multi-player is sick yo.

> "I do love an underdog, especially when it sports rotting Chihuahuas..."

Monster Madness EX	
System(s)	PS3
Developer	Psyonix
Publisher	SouthPeak
Online/Multi	1-4
Available	Q1 2008

Legendary: The Box

words Brady Fiechter

If you've ever wondered what could possibly be inside Pandora's Box, could it be anything other than mythical monsters bent on eating the world? The massacre begins around Times Square, the opening scene in Legendary: The Box, a make-no-mistake-this-is-a-high-octane-shooter first-person shooter from a team who's been on the job for awhile...

System(s)	PS3 Xbox 360 PC
Developer	Spark
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	2008

Interview

John Garcia-Shelton, Producer, Legendary: The Box

So the monsters: they're after whomever is in their way?
For about 2/3 of the game, they're pretty much after anybody. But eventually, you perfect your creature controlling devices, the localizer. And then what was at first a combat triangle, you versus creature versus Black Order, turns into a two-way fight of you versus both. They don't have to fight the creatures anymore. That dynamic, the extra conflict that you have is magnified.

And it looks like you like destruction.
We like to burn everything. You'll notice humans have a nice little burn texture on them. Kind of gross. It all ties into that subject I was talking about earlier, that angle that you take and go really deep on. For us it's that the environment changes through you and the creatures being there. You're always seeing the world change around you. Usually be the creatures picking up or throwing something, or a creature that can poltergeist things. We want the creatures to go through a wide state of behaviors. You can have a fight against an Alpha last a couple minutes. And we want to see that creature understand everything in this world that you're used to playing with in games now, the gravity gun, your ability to throw things, your ability to use things that AIs never get. Everybody paths around all the objects in the world. We wanted to give them that same weight in the world that you possess. So that you kind of recognize them as equals.

So they essentially have an inventory like you have in a sense?
Yeah, absolutely.

And that's a big cornerstone to your game.
Absolutely. I think this is evolving. I think people had to go through stages.
Once we know an NPC is about to die, we set up a system to line up their animations so that we can really create a dramatic death event... You can see the underlying muscle and bone structure when they take damage. Enemies will go through different state changes, so he's doing a different behavioral fight. Once you get used to a pattern, there's a change. What feels like a boss fight is in essence just a core AI creature. He feels very boss like because of the amount of behaviors he can cycle through.

There's quite a variety of types and strengths you'll face?

> "...you don't get a snipe rifle, it wouldn't do you any good in our game."

Of course, you'll fight various range of creatures. The Alpha and the Minotaur are some of the tougher creatures. And you'll notice, you're sucking animus from the creatures. Once the signet is branded to you, you're given control over the creature.

[We watch as the game comes up on impossibly steep stairs.]
I call those the Exorcist stairs. It's always fun to watch characters crash down the stairs. What's ragdoll if you don't get to have fun with it.
I like to mix and match creature types. Sometimes you have what I like to call a turret-type creature, which is more grounded to the space. More of an environemental puzzle for the player than it is a full-on AI. Then we have even simpler classes to fight, plus a couple of different human variations. Basically taking advantage of what we've done before with Medal of Honor and Call of Duty, we know how to make human AI pretty solid. And we can really mix and match between the simpler creatures and some of the harder creatures.
We can use our systems. We can tie them to the object-database systems so they understand the object, and we can use some of the state changes and the pathfinding that we've really invested in heavily. So we can use a lot of the movement code we've done, because it's really robust and strong movement code. We actually spent a couple of months after we had made the AI pretty solid, just creating rooms to see if the creature could find you anywhere. Make sure there's no place you could hide. Anywhere you are, he's going to find you, bust through things, move things aside, he's going to get to you in that space. It's really fortunate that we can take it to other characters. The key to humans is that they obviously need to be human-like. They need to have a sense of self-preservation and a sense of intelligence. But the key here is that it's not about fighting humans, it's about the creatures. People are there to give you a context for the creature's power. It's one of the reasons we didn't give commands to buddies. I want Redshirts. I want Star Trek; everybody who goes down with Kirk is gonna die.

So this is really a creature-fest?
It's a creature-fest. It's an action-disaster movie. But it's definitely still a mix, because we do like first-person shooter action, we do like to have you have to occupy a cover point occasionally.

And the monsters are constantly pushing you out of those cover points?
Yes. So that conflict of, I'm getting fire from here, I saw that wolf go around that wall. He's after your ass right now, so you have to pick and chose. It's fun, because in a game with humans, it's always about what's

"Escapist entertainment is an important part of our culture. It's a way for people to heal, they can rest, they can recover."

forward. I'm gonna step up to here and looking there, OK, I'm clear, so I'll step up there to that next point. I never look back, I never worry about how many feet I have to go back. With our creatures, we've created a constant need to go forward and check around, be aware of the space you can back up to. Because in some cases you can get yourself bottled up against an Alpha in a small space, and he'll just start hauling off on you. So you really have to be aware of your full space and use it accordingly. You can't just be going forward; you have to go back. It makes for a lot more environmental awareness, which is a fun, different sort of intensity.

And there's a big element of verticality to the monsters?

Absolutely. They're gonna avoid your line of sight. We spent time to make sure, if they see those bullets flying, they're gonna be heading in a different direction. They're gonna come around you, try to get you from the side or behind. And we've spent a lot of time with maintaining variety. They're not just coming from the side every time, or behind, and sometimes they're just really pissed and come straight in.

It's important that the world is different. Most games either live in beautiful science fiction, or a post-apocalyptic world. Those are the fantasy aspects of a lot of first-person shooters. Then there's the military aspect of first-person shooters. Well, we have our own space, and it is the moment of the apocalypse in our own world. It's modern day, it could happen today.

So you're pretty comfortable with where you're at, what you're doing?

You know, you don't normally get this many seniors on a team. I'm really happy with what we're pulling off. You're gonna get this group when you've gone through your pains, that you decide that you're no longer gonna base... Passion is important, but a career isn't based on passion, a career is based on professionalism. We have to have a process that every day is important, that we're not cramming at crunch, every day is just as important, we're gonna be methodical. Every single day is important. It's kind of like the seven-minute mile. And that attracts professionals, that attracts senior people, because they've been through that pain. And you know, senior people don't last long. You look at the true seniors in video games, well, no one's really a senior. Where are the guys that have been here for ten years, they're gone. We're working to cultivate an atmosphere where people stay and there really are people who have been through the fires with multiple games. It's worked out really good. We have a great process. And we do have the passionate people who know the rules

Where do you go from here? Having been in the genre for a long time, what does that mean for Legendary?

I sort of have these beliefs on how much evolution you can take a team each game. Because I've watched teams usually take too many. On Frontline, our original plan was to make what they did in Company of Heroes. We had this whole structure where we used the D-pad to send out commands to guys and you had a group of guys that went with you. And moving Medal of Honor to the PS2, trying to get all the action and intensity in the setting, that was too many steps of evolution at that time for the team. For us, on this game, part of our success is that our evolution was creature-based, melee class AIs. We're gonna take what we do really well, our custom spawning, our scene stuff, we know how to script. But we're taking our stab at unique AI, we're gonna really go deep on the AI this time. That was it. That was our main evolution step. So you have to control it that you move far enough that you do everything you're aiming for really well. You never really know where you're going next until you get to the next project.

You mentioned the idea of co-op.

I would still love to make a co-op game. There are so many great games. I probably loved Zelda: Ocarina of Time the most. As far as "Wow, that's just the most awesome game I've ever seen." I didn't know you could go that deep and have that rich of an experience. But I also remember something like co-op Twisted Metal 2. We used to play that game, just burn through it it was so much fun. It'd be fun to take a stab at really making a great co-op experience. There are definitely going to be some great co-op games...

Come fly the friendly skies.

"You know, look at Bioshock, they didn't do multiplayer and they didn't need it."

But we just can't expect it to be a standard. I'm starting to hear that annoying battle cry.

Yeah, because what you're doing, you're watering down the creator's intent in what they can provide you with what they have available. They can only give you so much. How many angles do you want them to go deep on? If it's more than one or two, you're not getting there. You know, look at Bioshock, they didn't do multiplayer and they didn't need it. For me, I like it more than Halo.

Well, it's tough, you have those people who rip the box open in Halo and go straight to multiplayer. I will never be that guy. I hope to always see a very defined approach to please a specific audience. I want to see a game that appeals to very specific sensibilities rather than trying to be something for everyone.

You want to have something that's unique to you. I used to rail. We'd always get into these meetings, what's the feature to put on the box? What's the thing we're gonna say to get people in? And a lot of times we're like, don't you understand, games are getting to the point where we're just telling different stories, and it's how well we tell it. It's taken me awhile to come around to, you need to have something that's unique, that is that one tent pole that goes through that entire game.

Which is tough to articulate.

It takes a while. For us, we've gone through a couple of things, right now I'm at "nowhere to hide" is the best way to describe it. That moment, when we bring the fight to you. You stick in a cover point for too long, you're gonna take it. And one way that radiates out, there's no zoom on the sniper scope. You go into a scope; actually, not a sniper rifle, you don't get a snipe rifle, it wouldn't do you any good in our game. You get an assault rifle with a scope, but there is no zoom. I'm not giving you tools to zoom in and stay awhile.

You just don't want to slow it down?

On top of it, that would be going against my game principles. If you start slowly looking around, you're gonna get hauled off on. Something's just gonna come up and say, "No no, I don't think so." And then you have to switch from that sniper rifle with low rounds to something with knock-back power so you can get that creature off you. You take that core principle and all your other features have to support it.

So this is all just full-throttle shooting? Really no down moments, explorative moments?

It's an action game. We're trying to be the good Jerry Bruckheimer movies. I think Spark's identity, we're trying to be summer blockbusters, not fall thrillers. I'd say Bioshock, fall thriller. We want to be those titles that are roller-coaster rides but at the same time, what we're doing now is working with radically different AI, you can play the same area multiple times. You play Call of Duty: Finest Hour, it's more of a scripted experience. This is definitely an evolution for us that we're really happy with.

You talked about toying with squad members. What were your specific intentions for Legendary from the start?

There was a moment when we brought all the leads in, we just sort of started categorizing. We wrote down all the first-person shooter features that you could have. Great weapons. Dynamic AI. Destructible worlds. We just put in all those tag lines that you hear everyone saying and ranked them... We really looked at what [made the most sense.]

And I'm glad you didn't go with controlled squads. That just doesn't seem to work right now. I just feel like you're fumbling to get them to do anything you really want.

Exactly. Our squad guys are gonna follow you to a point, but they're not gonna get in your way, and they're gonna die. That's what we want. Guys that have to live, we're gonna take in and out. We're not gonna keep invulnerable people onscreen, because that also takes you out of the experience. I do like the feeling, in some maps, of working with a team. But it's more peripheral. It's more for the intensity than actual impact on how you play the level.

Always a balance, huh?

Yeah, that's what we're doing right now. Right now it's all about tuning that balance. Part of that intensity is important. There are different scales of hard fighting. It's important to tell people, don't have this here...everyone wants their moment, their level to have those intense, high-action moments. But you have to say "no, if everyone does that, we're going to lose the high moments, we're going to lose the high points." People are going to get desensitized. So thankfully we have a fair amount of time still to polish this game up and fix the bugs. It's a great place to be.

You've got an interesting look to the game for sure.

I want to make sure that people who like the Legendary world, people who enjoy it, they have a full rich world to explore and a return to the investment of their time. So that they can learn a lot and feel like they know a lot and went into a different world. Escapist entertainment is an important part of our culture. It's a way for people to heal, they can rest, they can recover. It's a great aspect of our culture I like a lot.

Burnout Paradise

How not to drive in real life

words Brady Fiechter

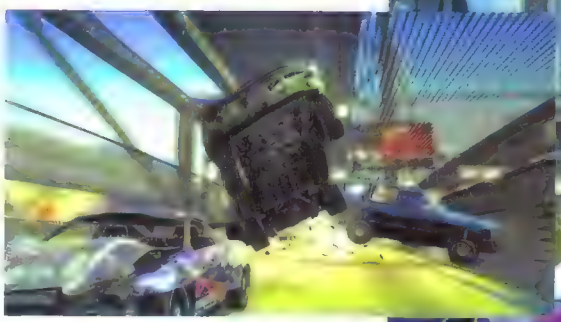
So what we have here is Burnout In An Open World. That's been a loose description of the game for a while, but what does that ultimately mean? Now that I've finally gotten a personal copy of the game to explore, my own answer is: the series the way it really needed to be. Burnout has its big fans who won't agree, but I've always found the game limiting and too one-note, amplified by the confined track structure. The Burnout formula is still true to past games in many ways, but the intricately designed Paradise City liberates the series in so many great ways. But one interesting point countered by a colleague of mine: is there a threat that Burnout is best suited for brief, punctuated challenges that are somehow lost in the expanse of this giant metropolis?

This is an awfully minor part of the whole, but the little moments in Burnout Paradise are what I found myself enjoying early on. There's an enormous level of discovery and task fulfillment that goes beyond the meat of the central challenges. I quite liked simply blasting through gated shortcuts, which are specifically numbered and marked off your status screen as you begin to track the nooks and crannies of Paradise City. The game does a nice job of resonating with the classic enjoyment of rewards.

Burnout Paradise starts you out as a bottom-dweller, with a central intent to increase your licensing status, gather new rides, and then branch out from there. Once you're in the world, everything happens within the playground of the city. Repair shops are scattered about, gas stations refill boost, junkyards house old rides, and you can even do a quick blast through a local paint shop. There's a ton of challenge points waiting at random traffic lights, and all you have to do to activate your path of choice is slam on the breaks when you get to a stop. You'll race other cars to a finish line, be forced to flee while the opposition attempts to take you out, strike out to demolish as many cars as possible within a time limit. Carnage is of course a centerpiece to Burnout—the damage effects are severe and convincing—but it can be just as much fun to take on a stunt challenge, zipping through the city at wild speeds trying to clear combo points, nail billboards and simply enjoy the thrill of the drive.

There are over 75 vehicles to toy with, excelling as speed demons, stunt riders, or aggressors, and one snappy way of earning new rides is stumbling across marked rivals as you explore the city. Classic seek-and-destroy can get nastily wild.

I haven't even begun to get a true feel for the lay of the land, but there seems to be a bounty of well-designed building blocks on which to instigate the crazy crashes you're constantly craving. It's worth mentioning, watching this game run at 60 frames in this wide-open city will indeed be paradise for plenty of Burnout fans.



Burnout Paradise	
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Criterion
Publisher	EA
Online/Multi	1-8
Available	January 22

Pirates vs Ninjas DODGEBALL

The ball to end the brawl...

words Greg Orlando

Harping on the inexplicable pirates vs. ninja craze is perhaps not the smartest move ever. Incorporating pirates and ninja into your dodgeball video game is, simply, brilliant and perhaps worthy of recognition by the Nobel Foundation.

There will be class warfare when pirates and ninja meet for four-on-four combat via Xbox Live Arcade. The game, of course, is dodgeball as popularized by such gym teachers as Mr. Raeder, Coach "Guts" Scerbo, and Mr. Mackie, a man who once made us perform crotch-breaking gymnastics at the tender, awkward, and most uncoordinated age of 7, as well as by the recent Hollywood film Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story. The goal is simple: to smite thine enemies righteously with rubber balls while either avoiding getting hit or eliminating foes by catching the balls they toss.

For this masterpiece of gym class gone wrong, Gamecock and developer Blazing Lizard are offering five separate and distinct teams to choose from. Players can opt to pit, say, ninja vs. zombies or robots vs. pirates (or any combination thereof). The fifth team remains unannounced and, likely, something to be revealed only upon the game's launch. Six themed arenas will be available and players are free to choose any one of them to compete on.

If you dodge a wrench you can dodge a ball.

In keeping with the tradition of great dodgeball video games such as Super Dodge Ball and Super Dodge Ball Advance, each of Pirates vs. Ninjas' players will have a special ability that can be used during play. The ninja Pachinko X, for example, can teleport a dodgeball directly into his hands. JD109 from the robot team will shoot a paralyzing frost beam at his enemies, and the Cajun zombie Jaws McGee can burrow into the ground and quickly reappear anywhere on his team's side of the dodgeball court. When opposing players come in contact with one another, they'll also be able to use special melee attacks to defeat their adversaries.

Dodgeball will also toss up three separate singleplayer modes allowing players to engage in exhibition matches, run through a series of contests tied together with a plot, and tackle various challenges in order to hone their skills. And, as befitting a perfectly goofy downloadable title, there will be suitable tips of the hat to game developer extraordinaire Shigeru Miyamoto (the ninja team is actually named Team Miyamoto) and characters who look like Johnny Depp in Pirates of the Caribbean or who wear skimpy ninja fashion and who are named "Kasumi."

> "The game, of course, is dodgeball as popularized by such gym teachers as Mr. Raeder, Coach "Guts" Scerbo, and Mr. Mackie, a man who once made us perform crotch-breaking gymnastics at the tender, awkward, and most uncoordinated age of 7..."

Balls will fly for an undisclosed price in 2008.

Pirates vs. Ninjas Dodgeball	
System(s)	Xbox 360 (via Xbox Live Arcade)
Developer	Blazing Lizard
Publisher	Gamecock Media Group
Available	2008

GHOSTBUSTERS THE GAME

You ain't afraid of no ghost, right?

"What are you up to? You woke me up just when I was sleeping good! I'm mean when I'm tired!" And so, provoking the awful vacant-eyed green beast with attacking scaly bits, you, intrepid ghostbuster, proceeded to remove yet another terror from the haunted domiciles of New York. "Don't worry! Leave it up to the Ghostbusters! All right ghost busters, let's get out of here and take care of business."

And so the tale of the last worthy Ghostbusters game went, circa Sega Genesis, some 17 years ago. Something tells me there won't be much concern on the minds of this latest Ghostbusters game to appease fans of past games and stay "true to the spirit." It's fun to reminisce, but Ghostbusters The Game, circa PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, is out to convince you that an interactive sequel to the movie series is a serious prospect that goes beyond marketing pleasantries. All the major players from the *Ghostbuster* movies are involved, starting with a story and scenario scripting by Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis, who wrote the original '80s classics. Obviously these guys come from a different world of entertainment, but their creative input in helping shape Ghostbusters The Game is an intriguing prospect for a number of reasons—if nothing less than to continue the storyline of the film and keep an authentic line on the idiosyncrasies of the characters

"What are you up to? You woke me up just when I was sleeping good! I'm mean when I'm tired!"

And as a huge fan of *Ghostbusters*, I'm particular fond of the idea of a game feeding off the time period and setting of the New York landscape laid out in the movies. There's so much that could be done with the license if they faithfully tap into the nostalgia and tone of the era. Great stuff to leach from here.

Meantime, for anyone who did try their hand at a little ghostbusting on the Genesis back in the day, you have to check out a few old gamep ay movies on YouTube. It's a treat.

Ghostbusters The Game	
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PC, PS2
Developer	Terminal Reality
Publisher	Sierra
Available	2008

Bomberman Land

+ Bomberman Land Touch 2

We're gonna need a bigger couch

words Heather Campbell

Bomberman Land (and Bomberman Land Touch 2) is a collection of 40-50 mini-games for multiplayer (and individual) enjoyment. Starring a quirky, Sanrio-style cast of characters, the single-player mode tells the story of a Bomberman Land in trouble. White, a Bomberman, is enjoying some time off when he's called to action. The Wii game features a sort-of shopping mall as the hub world, the DS version features a carnival setting.

Thankfully, a classic mode is also available. Mini-games are great and all, but when we hear Bomberman, we're thinking about…well, crazy, screaming Bomberman matches of old, not Wario Ware.

Multiplayer on the DS is accomplished with only one cartridge, which frankly is the only way these games should be released. Multiplayer mode on the Wii is unfortunately limited to the people you have in the room. Still, as many spontaneous nights in college will attest, Bomberman is best played with a bunch of friends on the couch. On the other hand, it's going to be hard to justify the package when ten bucks on Live will get you Bomberman Online.

> "As many spontaneous nights in college with attest, Bomberman is best played with a bunch of friends."

Players can trick out their Bombermen with unlockable costumes and content, and a gazillion play modes keep the party going.

On Bomberman Wii, players are confined to zones until they've unlocked enough Training Points to engage new mini-games. Obtaining TP is accomplished by replaying mini-games (or just having a keen sense of style; sometimes, NPCs will toss a little TP your way if you've got on a silly outfit), which makes the initial quest a little tedious. Maybe this will be changed before release, but it's doubtful.

Careful now; I believe he put something on that ball...

Bomberman Land, Bomberman Land Touch 2!, Bomberman Land PSP	
System(s)	Wii/DS/PSP
Developer	Hudson
Publisher	Hudson
Available	January 2008

PSP

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girls of gaming 5

A NEW WORLD TAKES FORM:
THE VISIONS OF NEXT-GEN

The first video game I ever saw was Pong. What a pure world that was, my mind effortlessly open to soaking in everything around me. A white dot (or was it a ball?) was being batted around on a television screen by a few white lines, and I had to be a part of this wonder. Hours later, I fell asleep pondering what I had just witnessed, my brain electrified by this new toy. My fingers ached to touch the controls again.

I couldn't stop thinking about Pong, unable to convince my parents that sooner than later I must own this celestial object and its foreign ability to hypnotize my inner being.

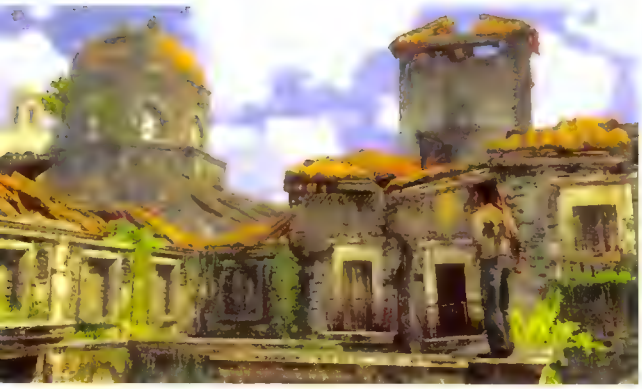
I would never claim ownership of a personal version of Pong, but this would be just fine, because Pac-Man was next to haunt my dreams, replacing my first love with something that transcended love. It was so beyond love, what with its blinding color and music and frightening ghosts that would time and time again meet their demise at the jaws of my yellow beast.

Time would pass, and my obsession for games only grew. Eventually, genres began to form, choices increased at a dizzying rate, allegiances were forged. Nintendo came onto the scene, and by this time, true little worlds were starting to take shape in my television. I began to learn the power of critical observation: "look at the graphics!" Mario and Zelda and Metroid were the final definition of AWESOME, but then they all the sudden were injected with 16-bit power, and were now Super versions of AWESOME. It was not to get better, even though it did.

As the years continued to pass, I still liked to use the word awesome when admiring the visual canvas of the latest and greatest. With its soaring dragons in a strikingly original land, Panzer Dragoon indeed filled me with a certain spirit of awe as I first guided my character through a new type of three-dimensional gaming. God of War was plenty awesome coming up on the end of the PlayStation 2, and what else can you say about Halo in its debut on Xbox?

And truth be told, before all that, Sewer Shark was, well, yeah, kind of awesome. Well, maybe not in the way Mario 64 was the first time you saw Nintendo's iconic plumber fleeing giant spastic Chain Chomps in genre-bending 3D, but visual

> "...what with its blinding color and music and frightening ghosts that would time and time again meet their demise at the jaws of my yellow beast."



impact in games can come in many complex shapes and sizes. And never has the whole package been so densely polarized as in the very exciting year of 2007.

The imagination is a mysterious and powerful tool. It's always done a fine job of carving out the additional details we needed to define the gaming worlds that would startle us, excite us, convince us that we were really there, toying with monsters and touching far-off treasures. There has always been a joy in that higher process of discovery; communication through interaction, expression through problem solving are all elegantly intertwined. But putting aside a literal concession that a designer's gameplay is the master guide, the puppeteer who is still commanding a substantial amount of strings, just how important is the imagery to the journey?

That answer is hard to measure, and there is a subjectivity, I believe, that comes with gaming that is beyond our recycled scale of understanding. We try to be movies, but we are not movies, and this is perhaps the most confused part of the modern process. What is the ultimate language of games, and how do we finally tap into it, and what is it in the player we are most aggressively looking for?

There is no denying that, on the surface, gamers play for different reasons. There is the type who find magic in the escape of the worlds, aching to find more elaborate and evocative transportation into a realm of fantasy. There is the type who is more concerned with mastering these realms, approaching them like a sport, massaging the ego as they find dominance and satisfaction in ripping apart the building blocks. In many ways, it all blends together in the end.

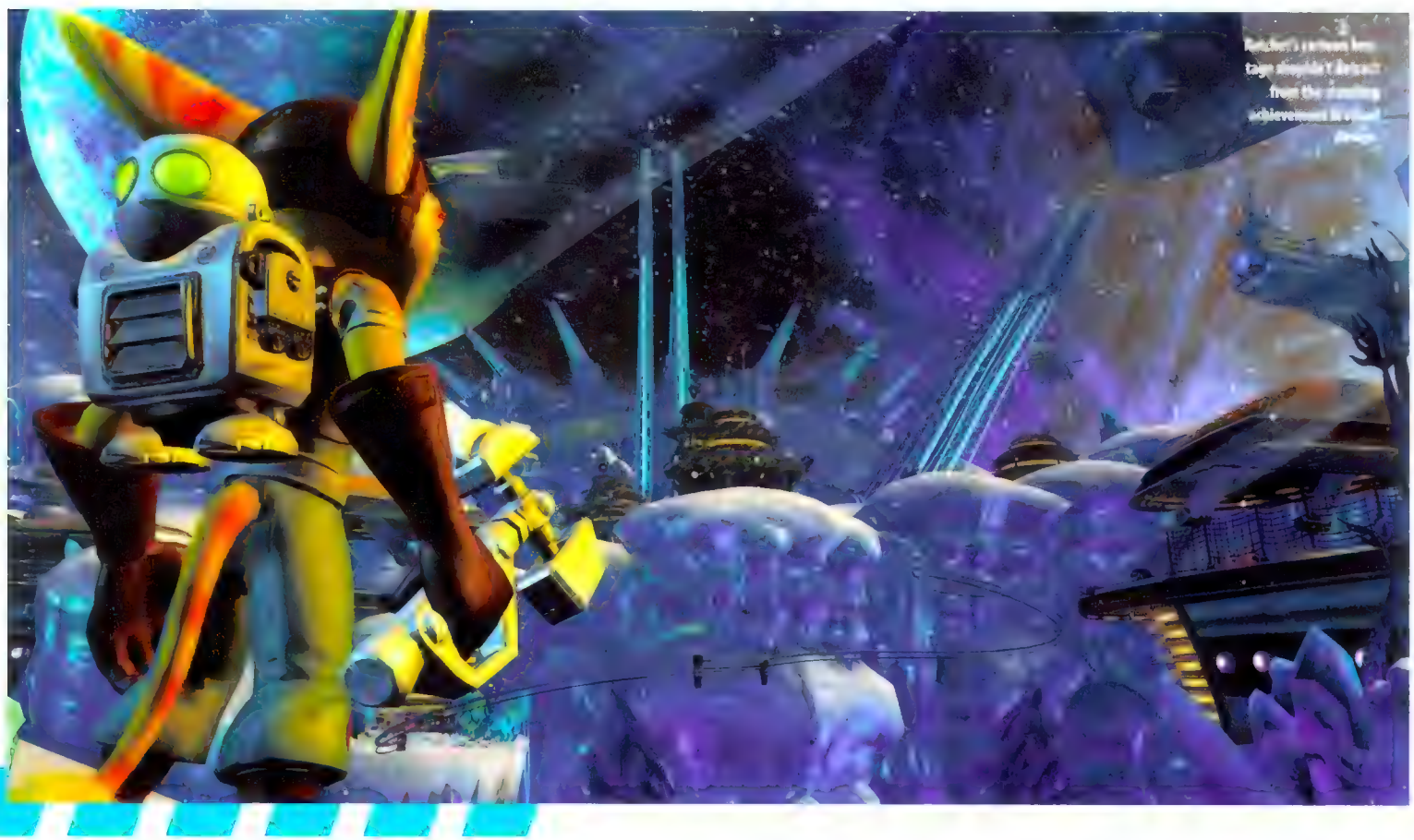
We all are ultimately guided by very similar forces, we are all gamers, but our opinions and tastes are so far apart, so compartmentalized. Strip away all pretense, and I would ask: are most lost to a real sense of wonder? Games are pretty incredible despite themselves.

I recall a quote from the great film critic Roger Ebert, in his review of *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. "I am reminded of the Isaac Asimov story "Nightfall," about the planet where the stars were visible only once in a thousand years. So awesome was the sight that it drove men mad. We who can see the stars every night glance up casually at the cosmos and then quickly down again, searching for a Dairy Queen."

Every generation is absolutely more awesome then the next, and there are many who scoff—validly so—at the lack of innovation and emotional maturity in design, but let's put that side away for awhile. When I play some of the most visually striking games this year, there is something taking hold that has broken free from a barrier every game has been reaching to crack since the beginning. This is different; this is more than the usual excitement of watching technology transition, and so precious few seem to pay much attention to the possibilities, moving on to the next fast-food fix while forgetting to appreciate the beauty that is beginning to take form in the gaming cosmos.

HD gaming is a big deal. Presentation and design and gameplay and characters and emotions are all poised to come together in big ways, in new ways. It's really up to imaginations to decide how far it will all take us. 2007 was an exciting year.

"We all are ultimately guided by very similar forces, we are all gamers, but our opinions and tastes are so far apart, so compartmentalized."



Reviews

Dave Halverson

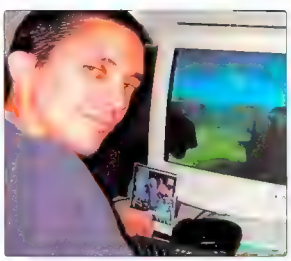
Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Mike Griffin

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Assassins Creed p. 056

The play rating system

10....Perfect
9....Extraordinary
8....Great
7....Good
6....Decent
5....Average
4....Below average
3....Poor
2....Bad
1....Terrible

Nick Des Barres

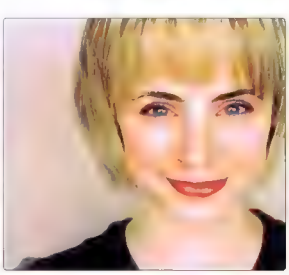
Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incompre hensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?



Heather Campbell

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

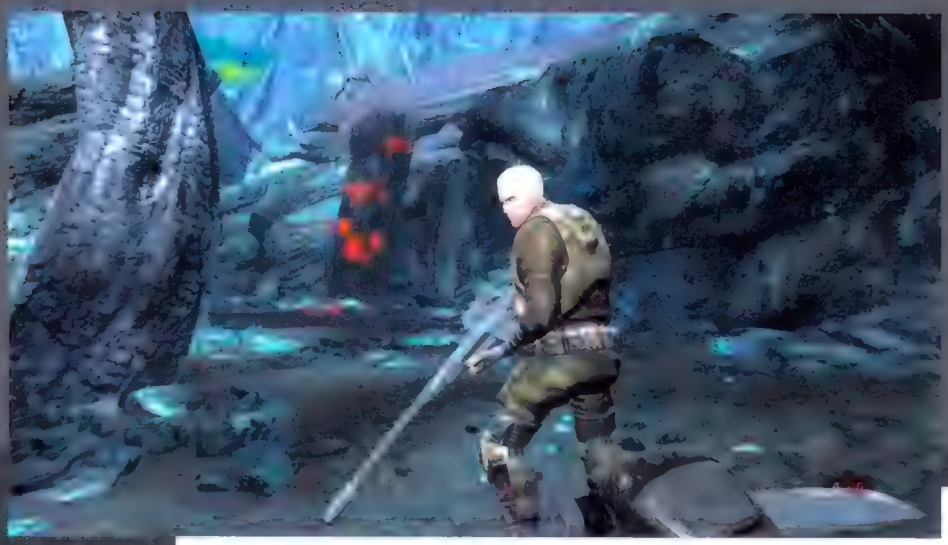
Mike Hobbs

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Turok

For those about Turok (we salute you)

words Casey Loe



Let's see that guy on Discovery Channel handle this one.

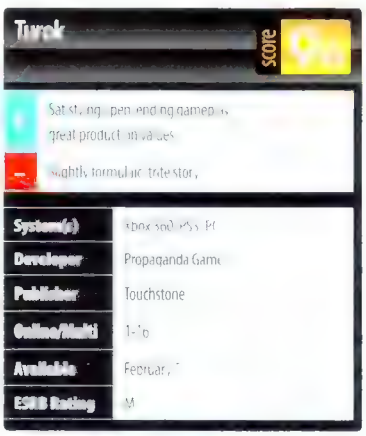
Dinosaurs really do make everything better. In the few stages that lack them, Turok is just another competent but uninspired second-tier shooter like Timeshift or Medal of Honor. But when the dinosaurs do show up, they provide Turok with a thoroughly compelling twist that those games could only dream of. Terrifying, beautifully animated, and intelligent enough to be manipulated by clever players, Turok's dinosaurs provide enough excitement and originality to sell even weary shooter fans on yet another Halo-inspired FPS. With this much raw gamer appeal, it's a wonder you don't see dinosaurs in every game, killing indiscriminately in Animal Crossing or upending cars in Gran Tourismo. It could only be an improvement.

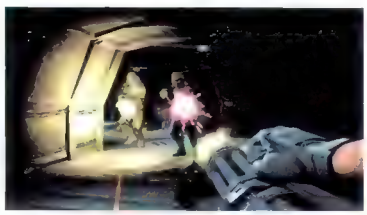
"Turok's dinosaurs provide enough excitement and originality to sell even weary shooter fans on yet another Halo-inspired FPS."

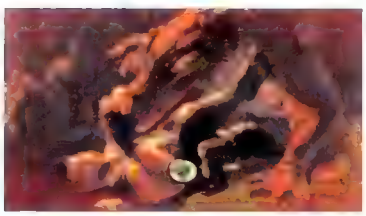
Turok takes its name from the classic Nintendo 64 series, but clearly takes most of its inspiration from Halo. The story mode adopts that series' single-player formula, offering a continuous campaign that breaks up its numerous shooting set pieces with quiet moments of exploration and short storyline events. And much like the Halo series, Turok relies on the impressive artificial intelligence of its foes to provide challenge without the crutch of carefully scripted enemy actions. As a result, there are several ways to approach each battle, and you never feel the invisible hand of a developer guiding you one way or the other. You're free to snipe your way through Turok's jungle world, draw your knife and go all Solid Snake on your targets, or get crafty and try to trick enemy soldiers and dinosaurs into fighting each other. The open-ended nature makes it far more interesting to replay levels, and keeps the frustration factor down, since you can often pursue a completely different strategy when you die and continue. That leads to a nice smooth difficulty curve at the Normal setting, where I died a fair amount, but rarely more than a few times in the same spot. On the downside, those deaths don't always feel fair: Turok's sparse HUD does a great job of immersing you in the game's beautiful environments, but the absence of a radar makes it tough to tell where enemies are coming from, or which direction you're facing after being knocked back by an explosion. And while some of the bosses are fun, others require a specific sequence of actions that you'd never figure out without dying a bunch of times.

The shooting and exploration parts of Turok definitely hit the mark, but the story that ties it together is weak. Its cast of characters was clearly born from the Random Space Marine Generator that is apparently included with the Unreal Engine, and the humorless dialogue touches on every action-movie cliché. A strong voice cast makes the event scenes watchable, but the new Turok is hardly a compelling enough character to carry what is supposed to a new franchise.

Even with a weak script, Turok's flexible play mechanics, strong level designs, and high production values make the story mode alone worth the price of admission. At a solid 10 to 15 hours, it's lengthier than most, and quite fun to replay at harder difficulty modes. The lack of co-op in story mode is disappointing, but there are a few separate online co-op missions that can extend the experience, and a wide variety of interesting competitive online modes as well. If you can make room for yet another shooter after the flood of high-profile FPS releases in late '07, Turok looks to be the one.

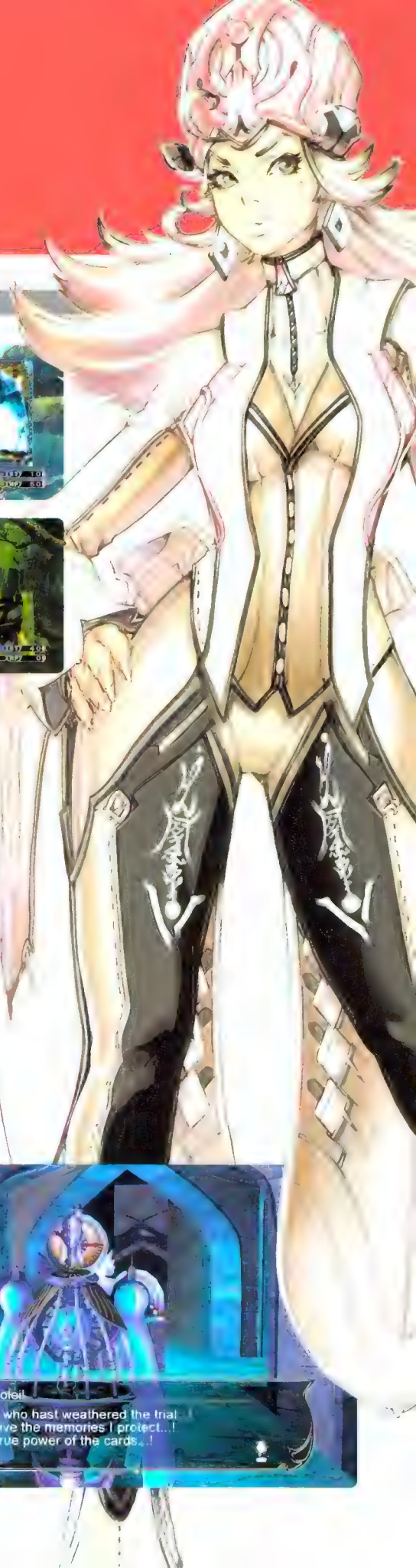






Culdcept Saga

The bastard love child of Rich Uncle Pennybags and a Serra Angel

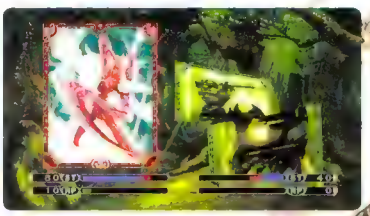


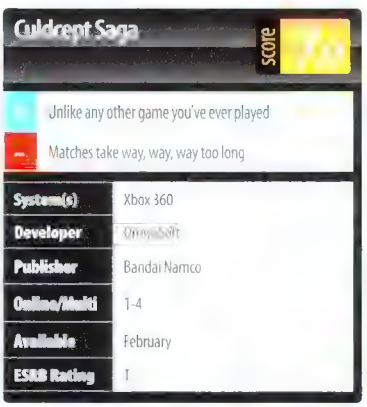
Culdcept is one of those cult Japanese series that has never quite managed to crack the US market. That's a bit strange, considering Culdcept is basically a combination of two games that are far more popular in America than they are in Japan: The Monopoly board game and Magic: The Gathering. Fortunately, that cult is about to get a whole lot easier for Americans to join—Culdcept Saga is hitting the Xbox 360 at the bargain price of $39.99.

The basic objective of Culdcept Saga is to use monster cards to fill empty squares on a game board, and then force your opponent to either defeat your beasts in combat (by playing spells or monsters of their own) or pay you a toll whenever they land on a square you control. Of course, it's a little more complicated than that in practice, but the game introduces its mechanics gradually, making it fairly easy for beginners to learn.

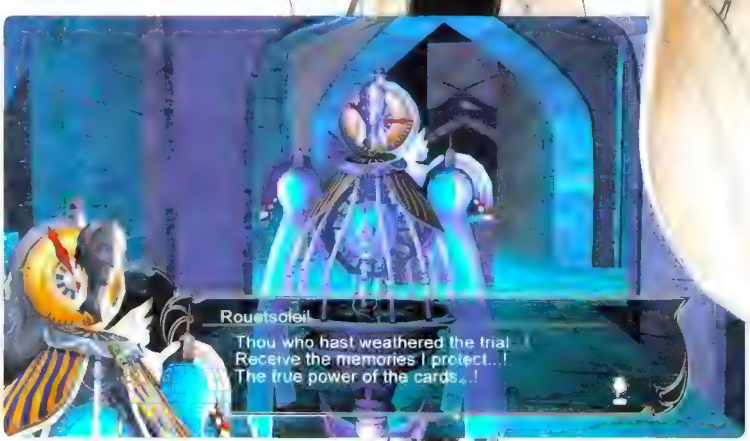
Culdcept has all the online multiplayer modes that you would expect, and offers a surprisingly satisfying single-player experience as well. While the story mode's story is hokey and poorly voice-acted, the handful of new cards you'll receive after each battle keep the game fresh and thoroughly addicting. The 3D graphics are fairly crude, but the game cards have been beautifully drawn by a number of notable Japanese artists, and the soundtrack by Kenji Ito (who did most of Square's old Saga games) has some nice moments.

Culdcept Saga features over 450 cards, and they lend themselves to a wide variety of viable deck-building strategies. But while there's plenty of room for cunning and creativity when it comes to putting together your deck, there isn't a whole lot of skill involved in playing the game. With its very limited hand size and tightly structured turns, you rarely have more than two or three options to choose from, and the right one is usually obvious. In that respect, Culdcept is a lot more like Monopoly than great card games like Magic: The Gathering or Eye of Judgment, where you typically have dozens of choices to make each turn. Instead, victory or failure at Culdcept is based more on the rolls of your dice and the cards that you draw than any actual skill. That can be a problem because, like Monopoly, games can drag on for a really long time even after a clear winner has emerged. And when I say a long time, I'm not kidding—a game against multiple opponents can easily take three hours. In a cruel twist, there doesn't seem to be any way to concede, so expect a lot of mid-game disconnections from online opponents. The deck-building and card-collecting aspects of Culdcept Saga have a powerful appeal, but the game-board mechanics aren't quite interesting enough to justify the excessive length of the matches.

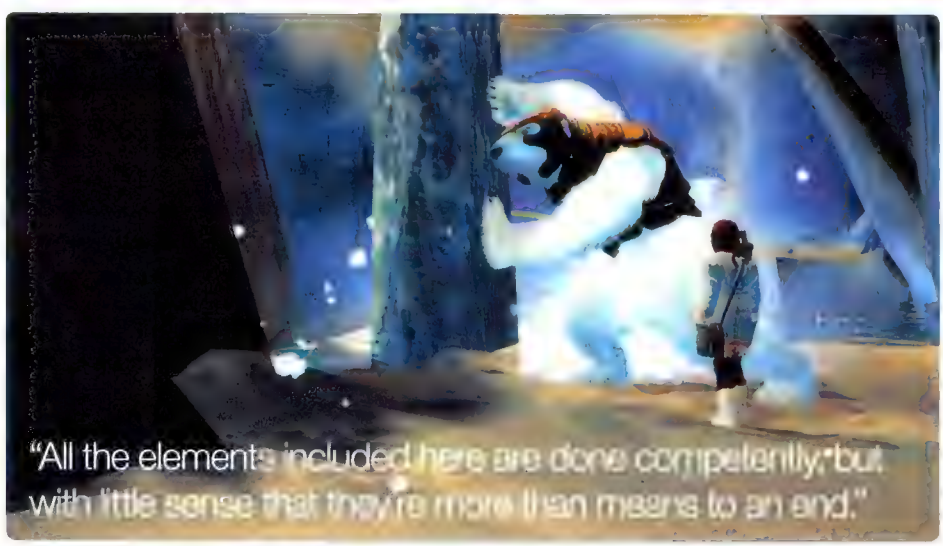




"Victory or failure at Culdcept is based more on the rolls of the dice and the cards that you draw than any actual skill."



The Golden Compass



The truth and lies play a big part in the video game adaptation of The Golden Compass. Plucky heroine Lyra acquires an alethiometer (the eponymous Golden Compass) that can reveal the answers to many questions, questions such as "Why me, oh lord?" and "Did I save the receipt?"

Compass throws lots of play elements at its audience. At times, it's a straightforward platformer augmented by Lyra's daemon companion, which can take various animal forms (hawk, ermine, etc.) allowing the heroine to accomplish different tasks. Alternately, it tosses up third-person combat with Lyra riding her armored bear pal Iorek into battle, minigames galore, quicktime events in the style of the Sega adventure Shenmue, stealth, and puzzle solving. As quickly as Compass settles into one element, it quickly shifts gears to allow for something different.

Ultimately, Compass fails because it never offers anything to hook players. All the elements included here are done competently, but with little sense that they're more than means to an end. Lyra needs to BS someone into getting them to do something? Well, she can do that by pushing green orbs into a corner in a dull minigame. Or by using an orb to pound three columns in an even duller minigame. Or by, well, one need not belabor the point; suffice it to say the developers at Shiny opted for minigames, but not necessarily good or fun ones.

The same criticism can be applied to Compass' platform-based challenges, its stealth, or its combat. It's hard to quantify a lack of inspiration, but it can be seen and felt within almost every segment in Compass. A genuine ennui seems to settle over the title, almost as if every bit of code was run through the Blanderizer 6625. Patent pending.

Ultimately, the game's alethiometer challenges stand as the best Compass has to offer. Here, however, the game strays dramatically from anything its intended audience (presumably young children, say, the 8-to-14 crowd) might enjoy. The game poses multiple plot-related questions to Lyra, each requiring deciphering with the Compass. Players must select a symbol on the alethiometer corresponding to a particular place, object, or concept, and each question holds three separate elements that need resolving. Although this seems like a great puzzle challenge, the actual implementation is poorly done. It's not necessary to figure out correct choices on the Compass because, simply, it's possible to get the right answer by completing a—go figure—quicktime event. Why even bother with the charade that is somehow a brainteaser?

When faced with the prospect of selecting a symbol to represent, say, wisdom, players might opt to choose the owl. Anyone who's sat in front of the idiot box knows of the wise old owl who can answer the age-old conundrum regarding Tootsie Roll Tootsie Pops and licking, but Compass simply ignores this—and certainly older, more classical references—and opts to assign wisdom to some more obscure symbol. Anyone seeking a genuine—and genuinely fair—brain challenge will be sorely disappointed here.

Anyway, not to belabor the point, but the most golden of compasses will point in the only direction that truly matters. Away.

The Golden Compass — score

+ Good use of film clips; interesting puzzle mechanics

– Dull minigames; game not well suited for its target audience

System(s)	PS3 PS2 Wii DS PSP PC
Developer	Shiny
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	No
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	E

Kingdom Under Fire:
Circle of Doom

words Dave Halverson

This ought to be interesting. First I'm going to tell you all of the things that trouble me about Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom, followed by how and why I can't put it down. For the record I chose Celine as my initial character of choice. Of the three initially available the brutal warlord Regnier is the strongest but most cumbersome (he's hella cool though), Kendall (fruity boy knight in shining armor that runs like he's on a pole) is as vanilla as they come, and Celine, well, she's smoking hot, speedy, and a master of both the sword and ranged weapons. You do the math.

Initially you'll notice two glaring flaws in the game. Number one: no walking animation. You get run and stop—nothing more. How a developer as artistic as Blueside could miss such a key element (especially after I asked about it and they answered that it would be in here) boggles the mind. You'll also notice that whether your character is on dirt or grass it sounds like they're running on corn flakes. Fortunately this goes away as you exit the woods. There's no blocking in Circle of Doom either, or evasive maneuvers. It's pretty much a textbook SOE-style action-RPG where defeated monsters melt into the landscape, leaving behind various weapons, trinkets and potions for you to use, trade, or discard. As you lay waste to siege after siege of marauding monsters you intermittently level up—dispensing attributes between HP, SP, and Luck—and in the vicinity of the end of each stronghold you'll find solace for the purpose of saving and item management. In place of Dark Alliance's altars, Blueside opts for three spiritual deities but the song remains the same: store or synthesize items, purchase potions and stronger weapons and say goodbye. The usual rules apply: sell anything you can't use or equip and use the money to purchase the strongest weapons you can. Moving on…

As disappointed as I was for the first couple of hours of this—I really love this series—it all began to fall into place sometime after I defeated the first boss, which by the way was simply awesome. The only semblance of a story in Circle of Doom lies in a dream state where Celine's former love Curian resides (or at least what's left of his broken spirit), along with a wise old man who happens to be a dead

Kendall: Dressed to kill

ou can't beat Blueside when it comes to Gothic character design.

ringer for Patrick Stewart—a medium through which you learn new techniques by defeating key monsters. What begins as a respite of psychological drivel (something about the transition of epoch) slowly evolves into vaguely useful information as the game blossoms and you begin to see the bigger picture that Blueside is attempting to paint. Now bear with me, because this is important. People often (no, always) whine about games being too short. Case in point, Heavenly Sword, which is also a hack 'n' slash. Heavenly and games like it are painstakingly detailed and set at a pace meant to engage and immerse the player from start to finish through elaborate set pieces that take months at a time to build. The polar opposite of that is the traditional action-RPG: long, drawn-out, repetitive non-reactive environments that derive length from stopping to battle enemy hordes every minute or so, while feeding you tiny little nuggets of information that will eventually coalesce into a story.

As much as I love (and prefer) games like Heavenly, Uncharted, etc., I also love a good Dark Alliance-style action-RPG and Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom, is exactly that. So, to everyone who complains about game length I give you Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom—40-50 hours of single-player action and over 100 hours to completely resolve. Judged as such this is an outstanding game—easily besting anything in the waning category. The randomly generated environments are gorgeous, the creature designs among the best you will ever see, the bosses glorious to behold and the soundtrack epic in every way. No pesky techniques to master either: as big and nasty as these bosses are, it's simply a matter of equipping weapons that can drain their bar before they drain yours (also, learn a healing spell). There's a zoom/lock-on for ranged attacks; combos are strictly a one-button affair and you've never had this much fun tinkering with weapons, spells, and items—I guarantee it. In fact, if you're not completely satisfied with your purchase by the time you reach The Hall of Arrogance, we'll send you a full refund, minus shipping, handling and whatever you paid for the game.

Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom — Score: 8.0

\+ Outstanding character and creature designs, endless item and weapon management, beautiful environments, great soundtrack

\- Repetitive gameplay, no walking animation, limited animation schemes, non-reactive environments

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Blueside
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	[illegible]
ESRB Rating	M
Available	Jan. 8

NiGHTS

Journey of Dreams

More like a cat nap...

words Heather Campbell

More of the same would have been nice.

Wow. It's been more than a decade since I first dropped NiGHTS Into Dreams in my Sega Saturn. This was back when Sega made games, you know, the kind that people really cared about, when Sonic Team was a fierce collection of designers and programmers that were supposedly working on some next-gen Sonic game that would put Mario 64 to shame. NiGHTS was their A-level side project—a title so revolutionary that it had to be sold with a new type of controller. The game played sort of like Ecco the Dolphin on acid, the character design was creepy carnival Sonic, and the surreal story elements were scattered across the game landscape unrepentantly. It was like someone had overturned a notebook of interesting game ideas, and shaken it until all the concepts fell out unfinished.

Regardless of the length of the title, or the slapdash cohesiveness, NiGHTS was one of my favorite games of all time. The music was great, the gameplay was new; it justified the shelf space of my Saturn.

NiGHTS was one of the first games I wrote about for Play, in our retro section.

It is because of the clarity with which I recall NiGHTS, the potential of its gameplay, and the quirky character of the original that I was so looking forward to the sequel.

It is because of the disregard for the original's streamlined choices, the inclusion of lengthy, hideously paced cutscenes (which cannot be skipped), a beginning leadened by pandering tutorials, and a general lack of catchy, clicky gameplay that I am disappointed by NiGHTS Journey of Dreams.

This game could have been so much; if only it had listened to the lessons of its progenitor, as opposed to paying homage through nostalgic cues. The music is the one unmarred and consistently redeeming quality of NiGHTS Wii—the rest is a mixed bag of unfortunate platforming that destroys the momentum of the flight sequences.

Look, the simplest way I can put this is, NiGHTS for Saturn began like this:

Put in the disc. Press Start. Choose a child. Run towards NiGHTS. Fly.

Beat a level, and you fly more in the next.

NiGHTS for Wii begins like this:

Put in the disc. Press Start. Choose a child. Cutscene. Cutscene. Cutscene. Merge with NiGHTS. Tutorial. Tutorial. Tutorial. Become a child again. Run towards a level from your hub-world. Cutscene. Cutscene. Run towards NiGHTS. Fly.

Beat that level of NiGHTS Journey of Dreams, and you're rewarded with another story sequence. Now, if the game was a role-playing game or an atmospheric first-person shooter, the inclusion of so many cutscenes would be understandable. But NiGHTS is not literature. The story is unimportant here; it's the gameplay experience—the quality of the level design, and your ability to interact with that design—which should be the focus of the game. NiGHTS should be about flying. Instead, it's about justifying the interesting choices of the game world by telling us what they are with laborious voice-over.

What's worse, almost half of the game is secondary platforming content or mini-games in the guise of flight sequences. You get don't get to fly that often. There's way too much time spent running around as a kid (especially in Helen's story), collecting orbs through third-person levels. The actual time you spend flying around the dreamscapes is minimal. It's like Sonic Team USA wanted to make a slow-paced platformer, and was forced to include the rocketing NiGHTS flight sequences to keep the license.

The camera in those run-around levels is broken, by the way. If you're using the default control scheme, you've got to stop moving to move the camera. Your options are limited to "re-center" or "stop to look around."

I know that there are some really great things in this game. The time when you're actually NiGHTS and you're dashing around the world, soaring through hoops with some likable music…well, those moments are why we wanted to play. The two-player mode is a great inclusion, and the masks are a charming way to liven up the straightforward gameplay with power-ups. But unless you're ready to battle through the entire title (and endure everything else in the box) just to have unmitigated access to those flight levels, you're going to be frustrated. It's like buying a ticket to a theme park where the designers thought the best part of roller coasters were the lines.

I want to make it clear: I absolutely love the parts of this game where I get to fly.

It's just that you don't get to do it very often. I can't rate the game on the perfection of its best moments. I have to take on the whole.

Just as Mario Galaxy is showing us that the Wii isn't just popular—it's completely capable—a game like NiGHTS comes along to make us reconsider. Maybe Nintendo is the only one able to take advantage of the controller, the hardware, the possibilities of the Wii. Regardless, whether you've been looking forward to this game for a decade or you're just now being introduced to Nightopia, this isn't NiGHTS.

Maybe that's why the original is coming out for the PS2.

NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams

score: 6.5

+ The flight levels are heaven

– Everything else is screamingly tedious

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Sonic Team USA
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	E
Available	December 13, 2007

"I want to make it clear: I absolutely love the parts where I get to fly."

Keep dreamin'. This is where the game shines.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

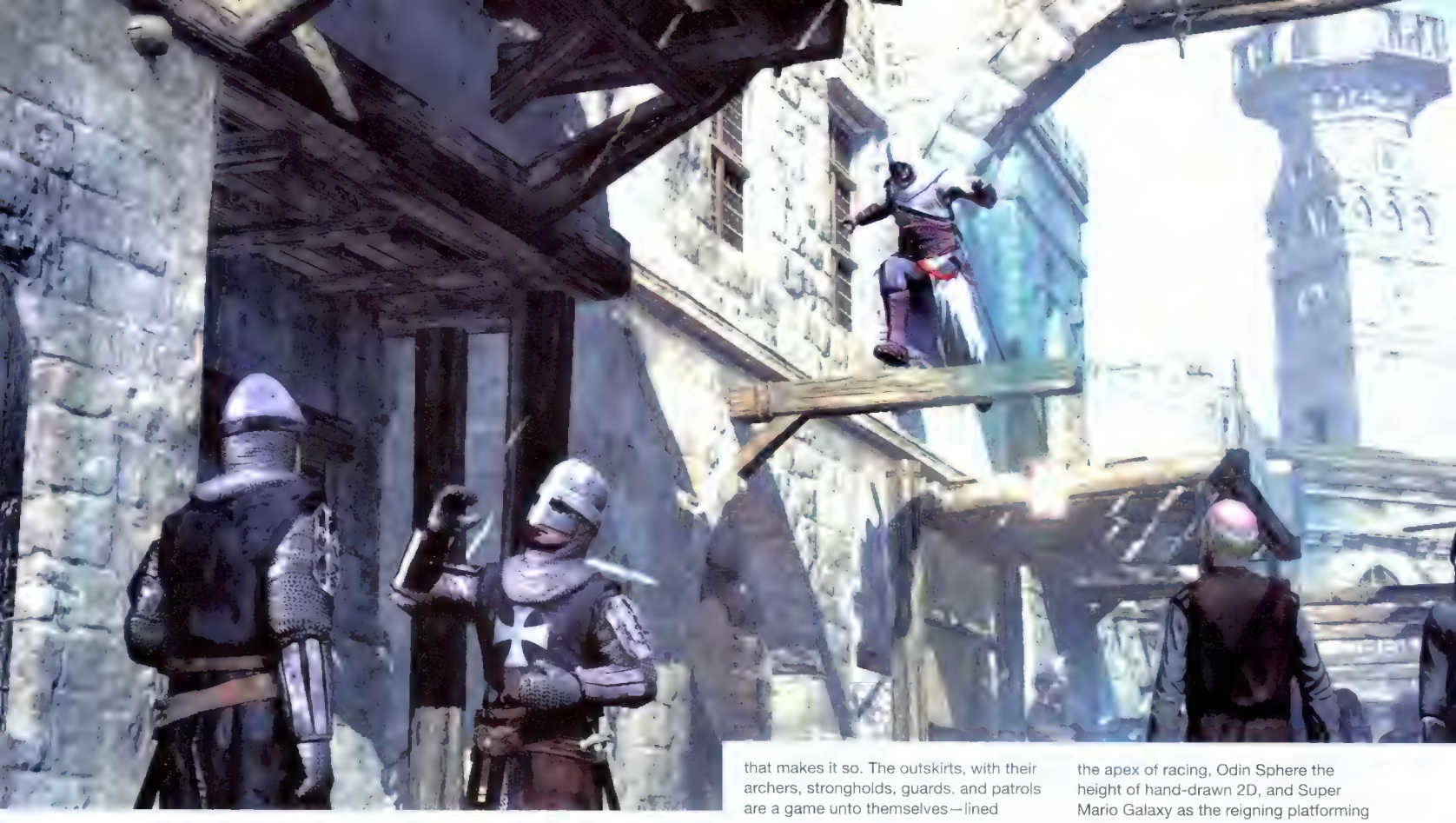
words Dave Halverson

As a rule we like to get our reviews into the arena of popular opinion in as timely a manner as possible, however, in Assassin's Creed's case, between Ubisoft's exclusive review embargo and the way our closing dates fall, well, we're late to class. Nevertheless, this is a game that has run the gamut of the grading scale so perhaps our two cents will still count for something other than boosting the average on Metacritic and Game Rankings.

I came into the Assassin's Creed fold as blind as a bat in a burka. As fate would have it the game just never made its way onto my play list. The preview opps were held at events that I didn't attend (playing a selected area of a game at a crowded event isn't my idea of productive) and discs were never sent, so, I didn't touch the game until a few days before it dropped. All I knew was what I'd heard around the office from the editors that did travel to the "hands-on" events only to come away scratching their heads. Now I understand why. This is a game that needs to be experienced alone, from beginning to end. It's epic on a biblical scale; part *Matrix*, part Crackdown, part Thief, and part Zelda, but wholly better than the lot combined for one reason—a dev team bent on pushing the envelope of artistry, attention to detail and precision gameplay, then weaving it into a tapestry of open spaces and densely populated ancient cities. I simply cannot fathom the man-hours behind the framework on which this game is built. It's simply mind-boggling. Beyond any next-gen game thus far, the AI routines alone seem an almost insurmountable task. How they wrapped so much into such an engaging and dynamic adventure is to me among the greatest achievements yet on a next-gen console; and the fact that it's a lucid dream makes it all the more compelling.

The action plays out in two distinct ways—sparse open spaces dotted with friend and foe as you make your way to each city, mainly on horseback, and in densely populated cities where you carry out your creed, as you deem fit. Both are the very definition of gaming evolved. In the outskirts, as you venture forth climbing observation towers to synchronize your position (one of my favorite pieces of the puzzle—diving off is such joy) the way is littered with hostiles and locals alike. You can choose to blend in and simply ride by the opposition, or dismount, sneak up behind them and take their last breath, or stay on your horse and strike them from the saddle, after which they will take chase. This may not sound all that revolutionary but it's the execution

"How they wrapped so much into such an engaging and dynamic adventure is to me among the greatest achievements yet on a next-gen console..."



that makes it so. The outskirts, with their archers, strongholds, guards, and patrols are a game unto themselves—lined with vistas beyond anything you've ever seen—but it's arriving at each city where the mind truly wanders. Massive playgrounds stocked with open-world gameplay and wall-to-wall grandeur, they are the epitome of bustling open-world gameplay. Eavesdropping, stealth killing, blending, fleeing, and exploring—there's no end to their bounty. And you can play the game however you like, as long as you get the job done. With each passing success more of the plot unfurls—in the real world where the giant pharmaceutical conglomerate using you for a guinea pig swears it's for the benefit of mankind, and in the dream state they so gently induce. If only Neo had it so easy.

My criteria for a 10 is a game that excels at doing what it aims to do as well as can be done for the hardware it's on at the time it's released for the demographic it's for, and I've given more this year than in the last 16 combined. I consider Heavenly Sword the current pinnacle of pure hack and slash action, Uncharted the reigning king of adventure, MotorStorm the apex of racing, Odin Sphere the height of hand-drawn 2D, and Super Mario Galaxy as the reigning platforming king. Assassin's Creed joins the guild as by far the best "sandbox" game created to date, rounding out the best single year I've had as a gamer since I picked up a 2600 pad. While 2008 and beyond may bring us even more revelations, this snapshot in time is the prettiest picture that this reviewer has ever seen.

Assassin's Creed — score: 10

+	Epic on a biblical scale, best open-world gameplay yet, excellent score, incredible detail
–	People will find something to bitch about
System(s)	PC, PS3, Xbox 360 (reviewed)
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	NA
Available	November
ESRB Rating	M

A view to a kill...or a pickpocket; an interrogation...

Beowulf

Thanes a lot

You are Beowulf, Norse warrior and annihilator of giant crabs, right up until you're squashed like a bug by a gigantic sea serpent and imbued with a Fury that gives you the strength of 30 men (and Angelina Jolie whispering cool shit in your ear). Go forth now and follow thyn on-screen prompts!

Yes: Beowulf is one-hundred-percent textbook movie gaming where they not only tell you what to do, but light it up nice and bright when you get close to it. If a pillar is glowing bright red, grab it! Still confused? Notice the red (B) button animation and the word "tap." The battles are also interrupted by select factoids, and context-sensitive boss battles rule the day (but by the gods, are they gorgeous) but that's just the way the cookie crumbles in tinsel town. Luckily this particular cinematic side effect was created by Tiwak, the ace team from Montpellier, France, responsible for the orphaned Tork for Xbox, back when Microsoft decided to abandon ship on anything with a jump button. Back safely at Ubisoft, they've fashioned quite the vicious action fest in Beowulf—a mechanical game, yes, but one with visual splendor and vigor to burn. It's a little rough around the edges—big-budget trappings like realistic expression and dynamic animation don't make the scene—but what movie game isn't? What it lacks in polish it makes up for in diversity and brutality. This is one bloody game. If ripping off a barbarian's arm until he pukes blood sounds like your gourd of grog, grab a sword and join the fun. Rather than churn out a token button masher, Tiwak has fashioned many a system to keep you on your sandal-tattered toes. In times of need the Command Interface appears to activate your Action Booster (video game jargon at its finest there) to lead your thanes by way of manly battle hymn via a circular rhythm gauge; there are squad commands, heroism powers, combo & defense tactics, skilled moves, finishers... if there's one thing Beowulf is not, it's shallow. Of course the tradeoff is minimal immersion due to frequent on-screen prodding, but that's on page 114 section 3 of the movie-game design manual.

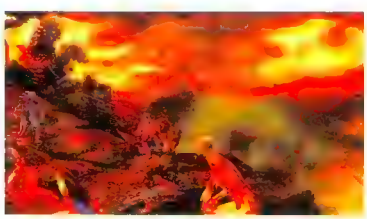
Tiwak cut their teeth on Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter for the 360, so they know a thing or two about squad-based action and how to make a console sing in short order on a frugal budget. With all of its excess like the Mead Hall, Wiglafs Tactics Table, The Balcony, The Bedchamber (actually, I quite like the Bedchamber), they've still managed to soothe the movie game gods and deliver a bone-crushing, blood-gushing good time.

Beowulf — score 7.0

\+ Carnage and giant monsters galore –plus, male b nding

– Constant screen prompts rough around the edges

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier, France
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	M



"If ripping off a barbarian's arm until he pukes blood sounds like your gourd of grog..."

time crisis 4

words Brady Fiechter

In Time Crisis 4, terrorists are out to rule the world. At one point they are deemed unusually well equipped, as your buddy proclaims there's no way they should be commanding those really large military vehicles and possess such frightening amounts of fire power. Not to mention the crazy charging flying boss guy.

This is the kind of threat only the VSSE could take on, spearheaded by Evan Bernard and Giorgio Bruno, both dressed like they're on their way to a tacky runway show in Paris.

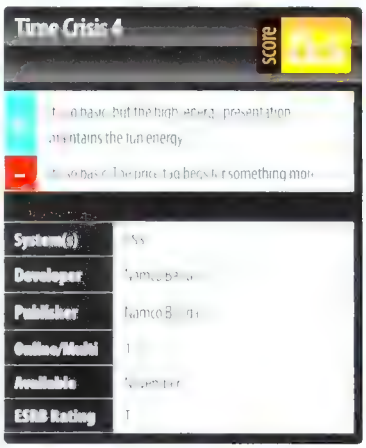
Before I go any further, I must also mention one of the terrorist's secret weapons, ominously known as Terror Bites. These are bug-like creatures that are unleashed in massive swarms and like to stick on the screen and suckle your life.

I can't claim to know the developers' intentions for Time Crisis 4, but somewhere in the mix there had to be some acknowledgement to the game's absurdities. It almost comes off as a parody of sorts, and its in this raucous charm that the game works better than it would have on its more obvious constructs.

This is a gun game, basic and bare. It could be argued that Time Crisis 4 is without much merit in a time that has graduated past this type of thing, and shelling out 80 bucks to pop pop-up bad guys on your PS3 is questionable. But let's face it: there is a very specific audience for this game that will find much to enjoy, and for those gamers, props to Namco Bandai for keeping the spirit of genre love alive.

That's not to say the game is the best it could be. One of my biggest beefs is with the presentation, which is too static and satisfied to be just barely good enough on the PS3 hardware. The game is so heavily linear and on-rails, it does feel trapped in a rigidity that can't be ignored. What it does it does quite well, but a few more new touches on a series stuck too firmly in the past isn't too much to ask for. Part of that attempt for more of a shakeup comes in the form of first-person shooting areas, but these limp gameplay stretches needed more of a dedicated design that doesn't feel so heavily tacked on.

There's a lot of content to the game for what it is, and while the Arcade mode is expectedly short—this *is* an arcade game—plenty of other chunks of gameplay will please the audience the game is meant for.



Don't feel guilty shooting these guys; they're terrorists.

Geometry Wars: Galaxies

Do the math

score

words Heather Campbell

System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	2-player co-op
Developer	Kuji Entertainment	**Available**	November 23, 2007
Publisher	Sierra	**ESRB Rating**	E

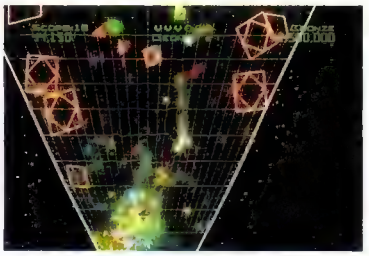
There was once a time when all games that came out for Nintendo systems had a prefix or a suffix that described the title as Super or 64 or Advance. Super Star Wars, Star Fox 64, Final Fantasy Tactics Advance, etc, etc. It's how you knew that This Was a Nintendo Game. And Nintendo games were good, right?

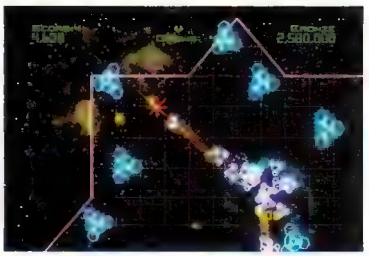
Based on a sample of two, I'm going to make the broad statement that adding some form of the word galaxy to the end of your game means the game is a great Wii title.

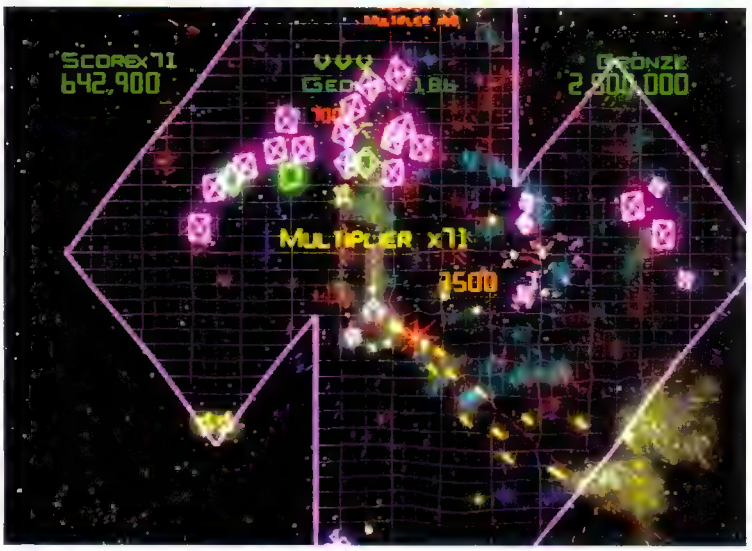
Geometry Wars: Galaxies is meant to be played with the classic controller. Don't let the default setting fool you; this hardcore shooter is best when tethered to a familiar, accurate hand-piece. If you've played Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved on the 360, you know that this is a relentless shooter with a huge number of onscreen enemies. GW:G takes that and adds tons of new design quirks (each challenge based on the level you're playing), an upgradeable sidekick drone, and new enemies. It's a complete package. Online leaderboards, DS Wi-Fi interactivity, and score-based replayability...Galaxies is a full game.

And there's multiplayer. It's classic stuff.

I don't have any complaints about the Geometry Wars: Galaxies. It's strange, the whole package isn't moving enough to be a 10, but other than the weirdo menu system (clicking on nondescript levels to try and find your favorite zone), there's not really anything missing. If you like retro-style gameplay, or are hungry for shooters, or just want something that you can pop in for a few minutes at a time, it's just perfect.







Endless Ocean

Go deep

score

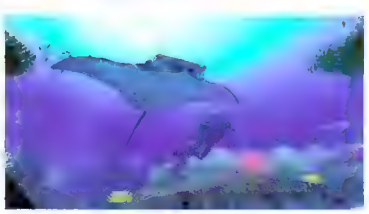
words Heather Campbell

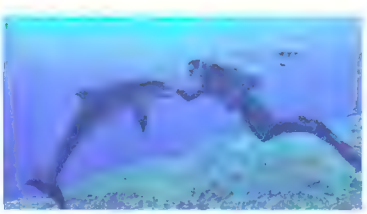
System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Arika	**Available**	January 21, 2008
Publisher	Nintendo	**ESRB Rating**	E

Endless Ocean is a perfect non-game, whatever that means. Assuming the role of a scuba diver, players explore a gigantic virtual ocean, interacting with hundreds of types of marine life. Using only the Wiimote, would-be Steve Zissous learn about real-world sea creatures in a fictional corner of the deep blue. And with Wi-Fi, you can dive with friends. You can save photos that you take in game, and score the whole thing with a customizable soundtrack is if want to drop some MP3s on an SD card.

For the record, the in-game soundtrack is pretty great.

The game will only be boring if you think swimming with virtual sea creatures to fill up an interactive encyclopedia is uninteresting. The presentation is there, the depth is there...it's just a question of taste. And by the way, the game controls wonderfully—just point the 'mote and away you go.





Medal of Honor Heroes 2

Wii goes to war

score

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	1-32
Developer	Team Fusion	**Available**	November
Publisher	EA	**ESRB Rating**	T

What a shame that Medal of Honor Heroes 2 is yet another worn-out march through the battlefields of World War II. The game looks fine for what we've quickly come to expect from the Wii, but the familiarity of the setting makes it a lot harder to accept the limitations of the hardware. The first couple of scenes I balked; this is not acceptable for a modern-day first-person shooter. But wait: keep playing, and the game reveals the superb scope of its control scheme, which begins to erode the lack of immersion from the visual space to reveal an underbelly of engagement. It's almost a new way of looking at the genre, or at least a step in that direction. Maybe this is dissecting the game rather abstractly, but this is what I imagine as more of a next-generation light-gun game than a typical first-person shooter. Approach it with a different mindset—which again is made more difficult tethered to the WWII theme—and you'll begin to see some very interesting design components to sink into.

Pursuit Force
Extreme Justice

And justice for all

words Dave Halverson

You know the "Dude, get your own" commercial where the insidiously annoying fanboy darts into the elevator and starts harassing the guy playing his PSP? "Ooh, Star Wars Battlefront Renegade Squadron—I like that." Well, if that guy was playing Pursuit Force Extreme Justice he'd probably deck the guy. Most video games ramp up...you run around, maybe take a tutorial, get used to the feel...not here. The intro is the first level in PF2. When a band of hillbilly punk escapees plow through a Pursuit Force wedding, there's no time for cake. Next thing you know you're skipping down a rushing river on a hover craft before zeroing in on the freaks from a gunship. Those crazy hayseeds have kidnapped a nuclear physicist... what? They have a Soviet Gunship? But wait, the syndicate is pulling a heist! So many crooks to bust, so little battery time!

If it rolls, flies, or glides you drive it in Extreme Justice—a balls-to-the-wall story-driven chase game with more icon-driven techniques than you can shake a police baton at. BigBig pack the motherload of diversity into their latest creation, on top of a graphics package that will have you looking at your PSP sideways. This one has it all.

As the game progresses Pursuit Force's irate chief barks out orders back at HQ where hand-drawn visages handle the vocal exchanges, as they do on the road as various punks taunt and harass you (along with the chief). Cases appear on an overhead map where you can choose your next scenario or hit the lab where you can reap your just rewards on weapon, fighting, defense, and ramming upgrades, all of which you will need—desperately. All of this vehicular mayhem comes at a price: Unlike many portable games Extreme Justice is no walk in the park... it's more like being chased through the park by Michael Myers. BigBig are obsessed with technique and timing—they didn't create all of this hot gaming so you could just pound through it—which means you have to do everything by the book (fortunately it's a very good book) in order to achieve your goals. You can spend earned justice points in the heat of battle so it never gets frustrating, but the idea is to close each case with as much justice—the game's currency—as possible. Let the madness begin.

Comparing EJ to the original they've really improved the driving physics and highway design, and should you feel the need to brush up on your tactics they've packed the game with opportunity. Bounty Mode allows you to replay missions to earn stars to spend in the shop on everything from movies, to logos, to cheats, and Quick Challenges let you hone your skills should you find yourself lacking in any specific area. There's even a meaty multiplayer mode. Pursue this game. "Nice Unit...Collectible!"

Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice

score

+ Hot graphics; tons of vehicles, super fun in spurts

− Time limits restrict gameplay a bit. No replay's

System(s)	PSP
Developer	bigBIG
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	WLAN Multiplayer
Available	January 29
ESRB Rating	T

Now that's an assault rig!

パタポン
PATAPON

Were you loco for Loco Roco? Craving more silhouetted swagger for your PSP? How about a rhythm-based action game where you control an army of miniature creatures pressing buttons in time to sound the battle drums that propel them forward? Sound intriguing? We thought so. Playing god never gets old! Here's what Loco Roco creator Hiroyuki Kotani had to say about his latest creation for the PSP...

Patapon	
System(s)	PSP
Developer	SCEI
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	Feb 2008

Just beat it; no one wants to be defeated.

Interview

Hiroyuki Kotani, Director/Game Designer, SCEI

So, "Pata" is square and "Pon" is circle... How does this translate into slaying gigantic beasts?
The player becomes the Patapon's god at the beginning of the game, and you sign a contract to lead them to the far end of the world. But it's not possible for Patapon and God (the player) to communicate with each other directly. As the ancient Patapon gods have done, the player must continue the tradition of communicating through the use of four ancient drums at a four beat rhythm. The PSP's Square button acts as the "PATA" drum and the Circle button is the "PON" drum. There are also "CHAKA" drums and "DON" drums, which players will receive as the story progresses.
Now, "PATA•PATA•PATA•PON" is the signal to move forward. And by repeating this beat, Patapon moves forward while singing until getting close to a monster. So when the enemy is near, just beat the drums in order of "PON•PON•PATA•PON" to signal the Patapons to attack.
There are other commands that open up as the game moves on, so it becomes very important to select the proper beats for that certain situation happening in real-time. The commands in Patapon are not just simply dictating orders, but we feel it has the same enjoyment as learning a new chord on a musical instrument. You learn a new command, and you play a new musical piece...and this is how it becomes so much fun to get into battles in this game.

Is the game completely command/beat driven or are there action elements to it where the player controls a character?
All commands are conducted using the drums, as the player is a god who leads the Patapons.
But, commands are entered in real-time, so all commands must be performed rhythmically without any awkward breakings...just like a real band conductor. This real-time command and the rhythmic feeling will incite the player's passion and really draw them in to the gameplay...just like when you play a game that has intense action sequences.

So if someone has no rhythm, are they in trouble?
Rhythm is very important for the Patapon. Better rhythm makes the Patapon more enthusiastic and becomes easier to raise their potentials to a "High" state. In fact, skilled players that can hold the beats for a longer period will reach the "Fever" state, where the Patapon are very active and can battle at a much higher level.
And it's not just the Patapon army fighting potential, but their singing becomes more enthusiastic and they come to a climactic state where the Patapon and the player become one as they perform through difficult challenges together.
The Fever will stop when the player mistimes a chain of beats but don't worry. Even if you don't have the best sense of rhythm, conducting 10 correct commands in a row will cause the Patapon to go back into this Fever state. Also, it's possible to go back to past beaten stages to strengthen up the Patapon just like in RPGs. And trying various methods of customization, depending on different type of skills and rhythmical sense, is another appealing feature of the game.

How many types of infantry are there?
The game can build up to six types of infantry. First is the spear-using "Yaripon," next is the defensive shield type "Tatepon," then you also have the long-range archer "Yumipon," and so on. Very different types of units with different skills appear, and so battles can change dramatically by switching the units around.

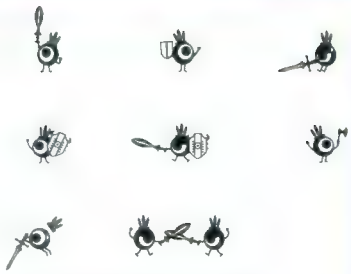
Do you begin the game with limited troops and earn new recruits as you move through the game?
That's correct. Like I said before, new commands and new infantry, and also original features will continue to appear throughout the game. And I think that players will discover new things every time they start the story. Also, units will practically get stronger by equipping new armaments, but it's also possible to spawn a Patapon that looks totally different

from others, and is also very cute, called the "Rarepon." There are six types of Rarepons as well, and each of them has a unique special skill that is unlike just equipping a new armament to increase their strength.

The screens we've seen feature massive enemy beasts. Are they reserved as adversaries or will we get similar beasts on the player side?
The enormous monsters appear in the game as the Patapon's target enemy. The sensation from killing these gigantic monsters by combing the power of these tiny Patapon is another attractive part of this game.

Is Patapon designed as a predominantly single player experience? (Hope so).
Yes, it is a single-player game. It's a game to get absorbed in, and dive into the Patapon's world. We want players to enjoy the singing, the battles, and proceeding through a number of adventures with the Patapons.

What will the terrain be like in Patapon?



There is rain and wind, various temperatures and climates, and changes in the environment that greatly affect the game. It's a really fun feature where some changes can trouble you but some change can help you as well. Also, the environment changes in real-time as well, so God must always keep this in mind as it is an important part of the game to try to lead the Patapon to their advantage.

Your silhouette art style is genius. Have you considered the action genre? I can't help but imagine what a game like that from you would be like.
We, in Japan, call this game genre a "Command Carnival." We tried to create an all-new type of game genre as it's not tied to a particular existing one. Patapon came out to be this way while we tried to have music, art, and the rising excitement from battles into one complete harmony. There is still plenty of room for us to take in requests from players who are to become

fond of this new genre. I would love to hear what people have to say after playing this game.

Tell us about these characters...what are they? Where do they come from?
They are mysterious eyeball creatures who live in RolitoLand (virtual home of artist Rolito). All I know for now is that they wish to take a glimpse of what the edge of the world looks like. I hope to answer how they live, and why they wish to see the edge of the world and such in due time. We don't want to give it all away just yet!

And the goal again...
To lead the Patapon to go see the edge of the world.

On it.

Pons dance to the beat of a different drummer: you!

"They are mysterious eyeball creatures who live in RolitoLand (virtual home of artist Rolito). All I know for now is that they wish to take a glimpse of what the edge of the world looks like."

Orcs & Elves

score

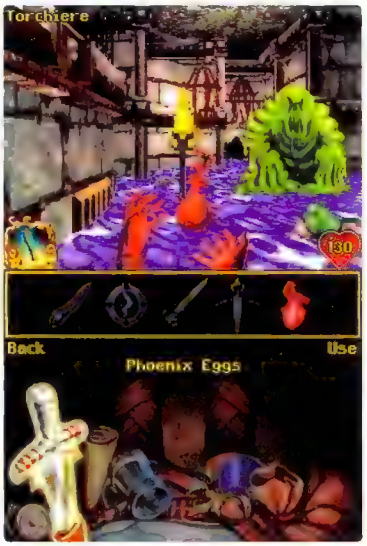
System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	ID	**Available**	November
Publisher	Electronic Arts	**ESRB Rating**	T

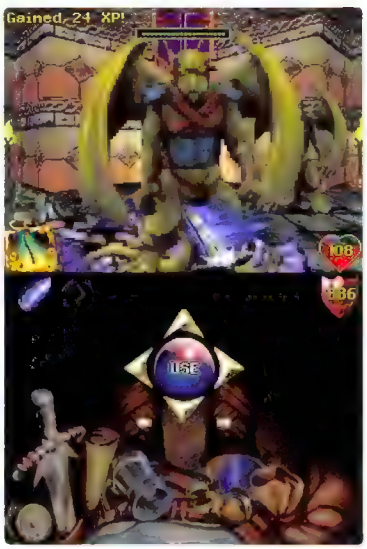
It is possible to dress up a cell phone game and make her the belle of the ball on Nintendo DS. Unfortunately, ID has not done this with Orcs & Elves.

The hit cell phone game presents a sweeping role-playing adventure and a sweeping, blocky eyesore. In making the translation from cell phones to the DS, Elves' game engine was built, as legend goes, by famed designer John Carmack himself in the span of four days. Perhaps a fifth day of programming was required to make the game look like an explosion at the ass factory.

To its credit, Elves gameplay far outshines its graphics. Get past the blurriness and the very real possibility of a throbbing headache in the pursuit of navigating through the game's mazes, and Elves offers a solid, turn-based adventure in the manner of old school, first-person, and classic dungeon crawlers such as Wizardry. There are puzzles to solve, weird characters to interact with, loot to collect, monsters to hack and to slash, and everything here is exactly as it should be. The game also contains three new levels and it's this bonus content that earns Elves its hard fought victory over mediocrity. **Greg Orlando**

"The hit cell phone game presents a sweeping role-playing adventure and a sweeping, blocky eyesore."





Dungeon Explorer: Warriors of Ancient Arts

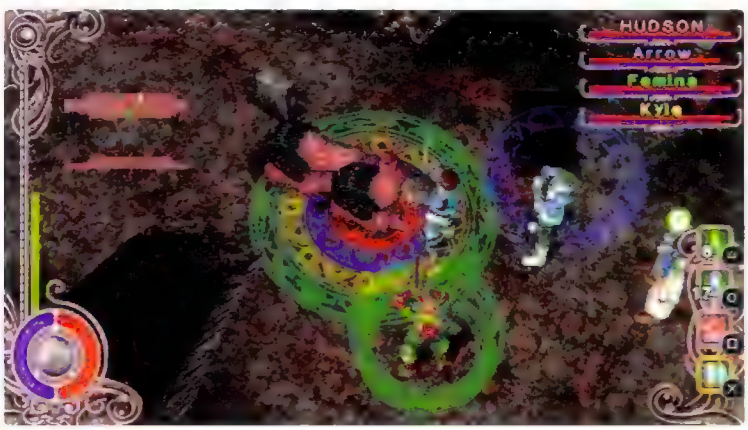
System(s)	Nintendo DS, PSP	**Multi**	1-8
Developer	Hudson Soft	**Available**	February 2008
Publisher	Hudson Soft	**ESRB Rating**	E

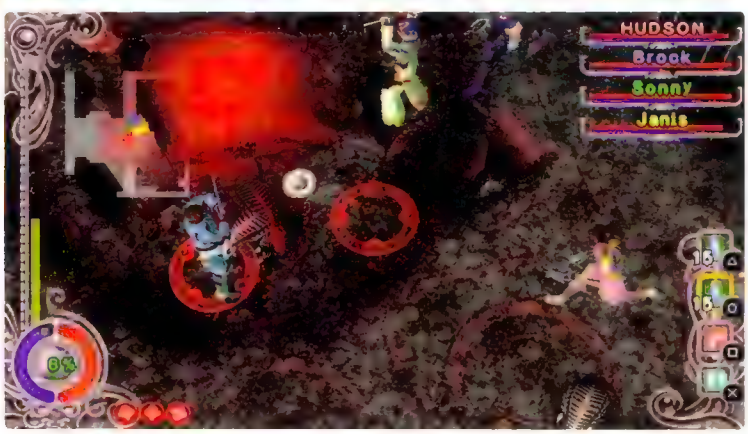
Way back in the good old days of 1989, TurboGrafx-16 owners (which, in my hometown, seemed to be me and me alone) were given a little game called Dungeon Explorer. The basic idea was very Gauntlet-esque, but with more of an adventure/RPG depth to it, and proved to be great fun if you had four friends to join you and/or a few days to blow.

Almost twenty years later, the series is being resurrected on both the DS and PSP early next year. This isn't your father's Dungeon Explorer, however: the game has undergone a transformation into more of what you'd expect when you hear the worlds "dungeon crawler," with gameplay centered around one specific town from which you set out on quests and brave a variety of dungeons.

Though the actual execution of this idea is different between the two titles, the basic premise is still the same. Your journey begins as you create a character, deciding which race and class suits you best. From there, you'll level up by completing tasks and exterminating monsters, with experience points not only providing for boosts in your basic

stats, but also improvements to your special abilities known as "Arts." Dungeon Explorer, of course, wouldn't be Dungeon Explorer without the chance to band together with others to thwart the forces of darkness; you can either team up with computer-controlled partners ("robots" on the DS version, NPCs for the PSP game), or play the game (to some degree) with a couple friends either locally or over the internet. **Eric L. Patterson**



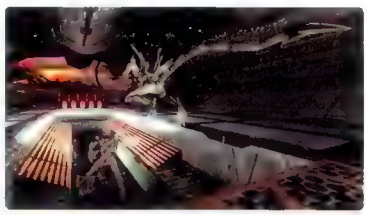


Alien vs. Predator: Requiem

score

System(s)	PSP	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Rebellion	**Available**	November
Publisher	Sierra	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

In theory, I'm quite up to the idea of reaching into cinema to search for inspiration for a game world. No one ever seems to quite know what to do with that inspiration, but maybe someday somebody will figure it all out and be rich and famous and we'll all be happy. Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem is not that happiness, which really is too bad because, well, come on! Aliens and Predators are ripe for some cool ideas as always. As a rather generic, low-key action-adventure, this game doesn't do much with the concept, and even when it tries something interesting—an "honor point system" is limply executed—you never get passed the easy, mechanical action. A game doesn't need difficulty to impress, but here again the gameplay can be approached in such a basic manner that you don't feel engaged by enough of the scenarios. The visuals are fairly nondescript, and while there's enough technical prowess to find acceptable on the PSP, the settings the designers decided to toss you into do little to excite. **Brady Fiechter**



Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Square Enix	**Available**	Spring 2008
Publisher	Square Enix	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

If you've got a few gamer friends with Nintendo DSs, and you're old enough to remember Secret of Mana for the Super Nintendo, then...well, let's hang out and play Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates.

First, you might want to know the story. Fine, fine. Well, Square Enix hints that the game will involve a set of twins who share a magical power. Their lives are tossed into turmoil when a blood red moon rises one otherwise normal night. "All fates are etched into the crystal," says Square Enix. Aren't they always?

Despite a robust solo campaign, everyone is excited about this game's multiplayer mode. Four adventurers, four cartridges, and everyone is running through a 3D dungeon together, accompanied by gorgeous music by Kumi Tanioka, the composer from the GameCube original. You can unlock multiple costume sets and trade items with friends via Wi-Fi. The combat is all real-time, and the game features—gasp—voice acting. On the DS!

How does FFCC:RoF take advantage of the DS's stylus input? With efficiency. The game is most frequently viewed on the top screen, and the touch screen is menus and character-switching. Players can juggle the screens to perform special attacks—time it out with your friends, and you can combo magic and melee attacks into what us Final Fantasy XI players refer to as skill-chains. I guess *you* can call it whatever you want when the game comes out in the spring. **Heather Campbell**

Final Fantasy Tactics A2

words Dai Konama

What boy hasn't daydreamt of swashbuckling adventure in another world, journeying through fantastic realms, encountering extraordinary creatures, fighting epic battles? Obviously, we all have...though in our adult lives, seeing the same people, the same room, the same office every day, it's easy to lose connection with our imagination. I only bring up such a hackneyed notion because Final Fantasy Tactics A2 succeeds at reinvigorating childhood wonder like no game I have played in a very long while.

Certainly, it helps that childhood wonder is what the game is about. You join protagonist Luso, an average boy living in the world we know, just as his long-awaited summer vacation is about to begin. Unfortunately, Luso is a bit of a troublemaker, and on the very last day of school his teacher directs him to go and clean out the school's dusty library. There he finds an old book he had never seen before (shades of The Neverending Story, an obvious influence) and upon opening it he discovers that every single page is

"Final Fantasy Tactics A2 succeeds at reinvigorating childhood wonder like no game I have played in a very long while."

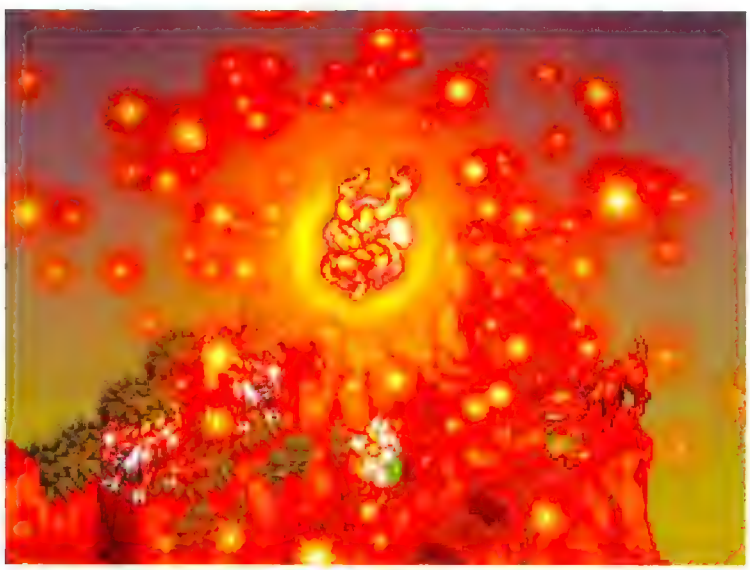
Final Fantasy Tactics A2's gorgeous pixel art will have you partying like it was 1994

blank, but for one line: "You who should fill these blank pages, name yourself". For no particular reason save mischief, Luso writes his name in the book...and the next moment finds himself in the fantasy realm of Ivalice.

Ivalice, as we all know, is the dark and romantic world Yasumi Matsuno created for the original Final Fantasy Tactics, influenced as much by Machiavelli as it is Tolkien. Here, though, after Matsuno's departure from Square Enix, Ivalice is a more mellow world, its Byzantine court intrigue largely consigned to the background. Matsuno may be gone, but his spirit remains–one can only speculate as to what he might think of the adolescent antics Luso and his friends get up to, but the world is still identifiably his.

Gameplay, too, follows the Matsuno model: Travel an icon-based world map, accept quests at pubs, play a battle map, repeat. This much has not changed, but a widely-decried gameplay system from FFTA1–the Judge System–has. In the original, the Laws ominous figures called Judges passed could not be lightly broken, for doing so would result in characters being banished from battle and thrown in prison. If this happened to your main character, it was Game Over...and often it was very, very tempting to break the Laws to gain a strategic advantage. In FFTA2, penalties for breaking Laws only extend to the current battle, and include handicaps like becoming unable to revive your characters if they die, the loss of a Law Bonus at the end of the stage, and the cancellation of Clan Abilities. It's still as tempting as it ever was to break the Laws, but with this new system it becomes much easier to do so if you feel you must.

Although the largest change in FFTA2 is certainly the adjustment to the Judge System, many other improvements have been made as well. In particular, the freedom allowed in character building has been vastly enhanced, and playing multiple Jobs allows you to learn a myriad of Abilities that can be combined in an almost infinite number of ways. It's unlikely any two people who play the game will ever have the same Luso, and one often finds himself pursuing sub-quests unrelated to the main storyline for hours, building stats and trying out new Ability combinations.



"Yasumi Matsuno may be gone, but the team he assembled to bring his world of Ivalice to life does not fail his legacy with Final Fantasy Tactics A2."

Naturally, this results in a very long game, and a significant part of what kept me playing were the glorious 2-D graphics. Ivalice has always been an obsessively-detailed world, but the slick, modern sheen of Square Enix games in recent years makes it easy to forget that it began as a hand-drawn one. The exquisite use of color and impeccable pixel-art craftsmanship in FFTA2 results in a fairytale quality somehow closer than polygons to the imaginary adventures of childhood, and the end product is possibly the single best-looking game on DS yet.

As near-perfect a game as I feel FFTA2 is, it is not without its flaws. The CPU often takes more time than feels necessary to calculate enemy moves, and airship travel can be tedious. Most unfortunate, however–and it has become a cliché with Square Enix games at this point–is the difficulty level. It is not a hard game to begin with, and as most players will certainly be pursuing the myriad optional quests available, they will soon become so powerful as to make the main story devolve into "press A to win". I can only hope the difficulty might be adjusted for next year's American release.

Yasumi Matsuno may be gone, but the team he assembled to bring his world of Ivalice to life does not fail his legacy with Final Fantasy Tactics A2. It has a handcrafted feel quite different from the clinical assembly-line perfection we've come to expect from Square Enix, and the way it so perfectly captures boyhood fantasies allowed me for a brief, wonderful time to be 12 years old again. I hope it will do the same for you.

Final Fantasy Tactics A2 — score 9/10

+	Ambience and aesthetic second to none
–	An unfortunate lack of difficulty (hey, it's a Square Enix game)

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	Now Japan, TBD 2008 US

Arcana Heart

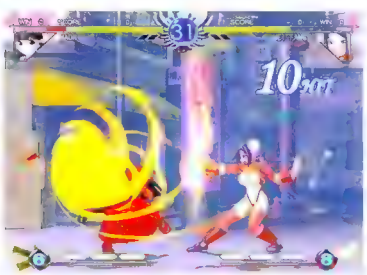
2-D fighting game, meet moe.

words Nick Des Barres

In Japan, a 2-D fighting game renaissance is on the horizon. It may seem surprising given what a cliché it has become to label the genre dead, but it is a fact. This year alone has seen several high-profile fighters released to arcades (with even more announced for 2008), chief among them Examu's Arcana Heart–a game with 90s soul, but wearing decidedly 21-st century trappings.

If it wasn't already obvious, the cast of Arcana Heart is all female. This isn't new–one can point to any number of estrogen (or should that be testosterone?)-charged fighters, going right back to 1993's unlicensed Strip Fighter II on PC-Engine. What *is* new is the aesthetic: Arcana Heart basks in all things *moe*, a genre of female stereotypes in anime that was only just beginning back when 2-D fighters dominated arcades. Whether calculated marketing move or heartfelt tribute, every single character in Arcana Heart falls into one of the pre-established *moe* categories (surprisingly strict; the Japanese are masters of classification). There is the cheerful-but-dumb sailor-suit girl. The gloomy Goth Loli girl. The school swimsuit girl. The Magic Girl. The China Girl. The *miko* (Shinto priestess). The feisty blonde exchange student. Virtually every *moe* fetish is represented, and one can only wonder at the fact that there is no Victorian maid. Perhaps they're saving her for the sequel.

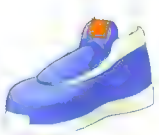
The entire game has tongue planted firmly in cheek; the cast are all stereotypes, but self-referentially so. Arcana Heart *knows* what a shameless pastiche it is, and its blatant purloining doesn't end with the characters. Gameplay comes firmly in the Capcom VS. series/Guilty Gear mode, complete with full-screen dashing, sky-high launchers and 50-hit aerial combos–the wacky and frenetic Snakes & Ladders to the stoic chess of Street Fighter, if you will. This shouldn't suggest the game is an unstrategic button-masher, however.... in fact, it is quite the opposite. Developers Examu, formerly Yuuki, formerly part of SNK's fighter division, were responsible for the wonderful Samurai Spirits Zero. These are folks who know how to do 2-D fighters, and Arcana Heart has recently been an official game in major Japanese tournaments like the Enterbrain-sponsored Tougeki. Much of its strategy comes from the "Arcana Force System", an ability you can use once per round to gain total invincibility and even break out of combos, and the "Homing Gauge", a meter that fills gradually, used to auto-track your opponent. They're both such good ideas one wonders why it took two decades of the genre's history for someone to think of them.



"Arcana Heart knows what a shameless pastiche it is, and its blatant purloining doesn't end with the characters."

From a graphical perspective, the game is more than decent. Visually it can best be compared to Guilty Gear, running in the same resolution with an equivalent number of frames per character. Crisco-smooth Street Fighter 3 or Garou this is not, but it's certainly on par with any other recent 2-D fighter. The only true shortcoming I can point to is the complete lack of parallax scrolling or animation in the backgrounds–they're massively vertical, stretching for several screens, but completely flat and lifeless.

Arcana Heart as it stands is a rock-solid foundation on which to build a fighting game franchise, and already Arcana Heart 2 has been announced for arcades. Unfortunately, I'd suggest you wait for the sequel's inevitable home release if the game interests you. Ten playable characters are simply not enough, and I'm hoping Examu will make the effort to spruce up the widely-criticised background graphics. Even with its flaws, however, Arcana Heart makes a fine harbinger for the coming renaissance of 2-D fighters. God knows, we've spent enough years without them.



Lower left: Don't let the skimpy swimsuit give you any ideas, buster–she's 11 years old.

Arcana Heart — Score 7.5

\+ Excellent fighting system and character design

– Lack of selectable characters, flat backgrounds

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Examu
Publisher	AQ Interactive
Multi	2
Available	Now Japan

R•Type TACTICS

The biggest genre shakeup since Panzer Dragoon Saga

words Dai Kohama

The magnificent battle graphics are truly a sight to behold...it's just too bad about that loading.

The history of R•Type, Irem's legendary shooter, officially ended in 2003. When R•Type Final was released that year with the impressive slogan, "The Latest and the Last", Irem officially drew the curtain on the series, revealed the shocking origin of the biomechanical Bydo Empire, and stated they would never again make another R•Type.

As it turns out, what they really meant to say was they'd never again make another R•Type *shooter.* That's right, folks–this is no pellet-dodger. It's a strategy game. The beauty and the brilliance of R•Type Tactics is that it actually manages to convince you R•Type was always meant to be a tactical simulation, if a rather unconventional one. This is not simply a military sim using familiar R•Type ships and enemies as units, but rather a wholly original experience that incorporates series staples like the Wave Cannon and Forces in ingenious ways, the action playing out on side-view fields with obstacles and terrain that resemble nothing so much as, well, R•Type.

You might call it turn-based shooting, though instead of controlling a lone R-9 fighter you command entire squadrons. One aspect of R•Type Tactics that is not immediately intuitive, and takes some getting used to, is the orientation of your units. Don't expect it to play like any other hex-based strategy game you're familiar with; R•Type is a left-to-right shooter, and Tactics stays true to that formula. The game design always has your ships facing right, and you can only fire your Wave Cannons straight ahead. These restrictions actually serve to enhance the strategy, however, at times lending an almost board game-like feel.

When units engage each other, the screen switches from 2-D side view to impressively-pyrotechnic realtime 3-D attack scenes, the classic R•Type mecha of yore modeled in loving detail. The only issue here–and sadly, it is a large one–is the excessive loading in and out of these battle sequences. You do have the option of turning them off, but when they're so attractive, who would want to?

That single, but significant, flaw aside, R•Type Tactics is a truly superb strategy game with an astonishing amount of freedom to be found within its engineered limitations. I've always believed the core element that makes good strategy games so fun is that there is no pre-determined "way to win"; satisfaction is derived from developing your own tactics to get through any given situation. In this respect, the game succeeds spectacularly. Its intricate unit manufacturing and customization system allows for any number of playstyles: Build just a few, powerful fighters to go after the enemy mothership? Spread around resources evenly for a frontal assault? Soldier on in the main campaign, or go back and replay previous missions to gather vital shipbuilding materials?

Perhaps most importantly, R•Type Tactics is challenging and long, and there's even a hidden campaign in which you get to play the game from the enemy Bydo Empire side. The R•Type shooters have always been tough-as-nails, and as it turns out, the strategy game is no different–a rarity and a blessing in Japanese games of late. R•Type Tactics is fairly import-friendly, but here's hoping some savvy third party out there picks this one up for the US market. The PSP may have a vast and compelling strategy game library, but even so, Irem's audacious genre shakeup stands out.

R-Type Tactics — score 8.0

+	An impeccably designed game system, beautiful battle graphics
–	Plagued with frequent and excessive loading
System(s)	PSP
Developer	Irem
Publisher	Irem
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now Japan

"You might call it turn-based shooting, though instead of controlling a lone R-9 fighter you command entire squadrons."

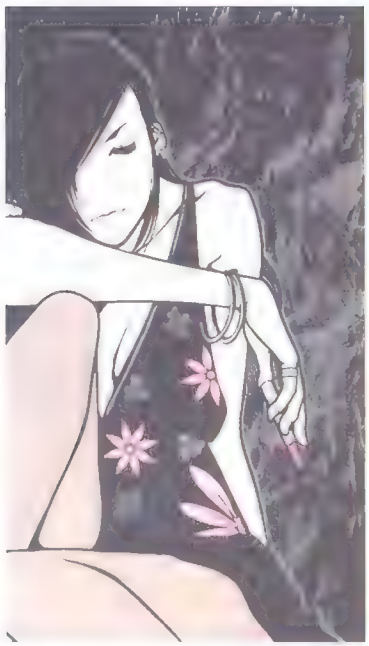
Imabikisou and I Will Never Forgive You (*Anata wo Yurusanai*): A look at the Sound Novel

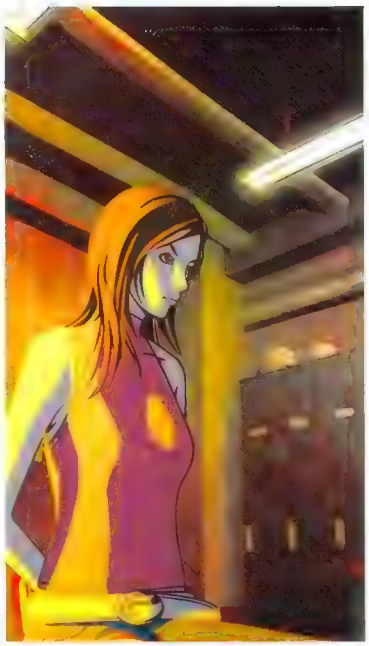
Choose Your Own Adventure, next-gen style

words Nick Des Barres

Japan is home to any number of game genres that never leave its insular shores. Over here, there are dating games, games about convenience store management, games about singing polar bears, pachinko sims...and there are Sound Novels. Although the wackier genres generally find a niche audience, Sound Novels are a very big deal. Essentially the video game equivalent of Choose Your Own Adventure books (though in recent years becoming much more elaborate), they are the creation of Koichi Nakamura, a gaming legend little-known in the West. You might not know his name, but you've probably heard of Dragon Quest (his co-creation with Yuji Horii) and the Mystery Dungeon series. In Japan, he is just as famous for his Sound Novels.

Recently two Sound Novels–Imabikisou on PS3, and I Will Never Forgive You (Anata wo Yurusanai) on PSP–were released hot on each others' heels, providing an excellent opportunity for me to introduce Play Japan readers to a genre of which I am so fond. Interestingly, they are almost polar opposites of each other: Imabikisou an unrelentingly dark, photographic horror story, and IWNFY a pop-lite, manga-style suspense thriller.





Gameplay in Sound Novels generally boils down to one thing: Reading text, being presented with a number of choices, making one, and continuing. It would be insufferably boring if the producers didn't always employ successful, name novelists to write them, and as such the stories are legitimately very good. What Sound Novels offer that physical ones do not is the chance to explore a story from any number of angles, and there are always several sub-scenarios that reveal the answers to mysteries not covered in the main arc. Navigation through plot branches is thankfully made simple with a system that allows you to jump directly to any part of the story you have already read, and in the case of Imabikisou there are literally dozens of short stories and background information on the main characters hidden within the text, requiring one to pay very close attention. But what are these stories all about?

Imabikisou tells the tale of a clique of college students who are nominally members of a horticulture club, but generally use it as an excuse to go on camping trips. One of these takes them all, save protagonist Hiroki, to a site near an old, abandoned prewar mansion, where they try a hip new street drug–Vision. A few days after their little adventure, they begin to have nightmares about a strange woman, her body burnt black, asking them a single question: "Who are you?". If that weren't disturbing enough, Hiroki, who didn't even attend the trip, begins to see her as well...

IWNFY takes a completely different approach to fiction, the light TV drama to Imabikisou's cinematic J-horror. Unique in that it is played vertically, IWNFY is about a family private detective agency at which heroine Ririko, her husband Manabu, father Takeo, and gay best friend Yuji work. Playing out much like one of the episodic womens' TV dramas by which it was obviously inspired, IWNFY begins with a simple investigation of adultery and ends with a case of much, much larger proportions. Although it doesn't sport the movie-quality CG-heavy live-action style of Imabikisou, IWNFY almost bests its PS3 cousin thanks to an incredible, swingy, jazzy score produced by none other that Nobuo "Final Fantasy" Uematsu–almost reason enough to buy the game.

Personally, I think the time is right for an adventurous American third party to try localizing a Sound Novel. Their stories are excellent, like the finest of guilty-pleasure genre novels, and translation costs would certainly be fairly low...not to mention the fact there's nothing else like them. Previous Japan-only genres like rhythm games and pet sims eventually reached American shores. I certainly hope the Sound Novel will be next.

"What Sound Novels offer that physical ones do not is the chance to explore a story from any number of angles."

Imabikisou and Anata wo Yurusanai (combined score) score 8.0

+ Fantastically well-told genre stories, high production values

– For better or worse, Sound Novels are games you read

Imabikisou

System(s)	PS3
Developer	[illegible]
Publisher	[illegible]
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	[illegible]

Anata wo Yurusanai

System(s)	PSP
Developer	AQ [illegible]
Publisher	AQ [illegible]
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	[illegible] Japan

The Way Forward

WayForward is a name you should know, but probably don't. They've been making great games for various publishers since 1990 but have yet to step into the spotlight they so readily deserve. Most recently they re-created Contra 4 for play on the Nintendo DS to such a degree that you'd be hard pressed to realize it's not from the original team, which went on to form Treasure—a Japanese developer who's also remained surprisingly anonymous even though they too have crafted some truly spectacular games. They say that every dog has its day; we just hope WayForward's comes ASAP. Here's why...

Interview

I first discovered WayForward playing Shantae on the GameBoy Color—easily one of the best games ever created for the system. I remember thinking whoever developed it must be true gamers. Is that the case? What's your background?

Matt Bozon: We're avid gamers, with most of the original staff catching the gaming bug on our Pong, Vectrex, or Atari 2600 systems. Shantae programmer Jimmy Huey was coding Mario Bros. on the Apple II back when I was a young lad, and our president Voldi Way started out writing code on three-and-a-quarter-inch stone tablets with naught but a lead chisel, some experts say. The other day I found one of our early games in the closet featuring a faded sticker, "now with sound "(requires computer with sound card)". These days our newfangled staff members' tastes include every kind of game out there, though on the star chart of gaming sensibilities, we orbit the planet Nintendo 64. Most of us keep one foot in game development, and the other in some form of entertainment like music, writing, film, etc. WayForward is staffed with incredibly talented people.

"Sure one could hire WF to implement an existing design document, just as one could club Vader to death with a lightsaber handle..." -Matt Bozon

Of course playing Shantae on GBC made the anticipation of the GameBoy Advance game all the greater... and did it ever look amazing. Why didn't it ever surface? Will it? And if it won't, can you burn me a copy!?

Matt: Shantae still has a very lively fan base nagging us daily to release that two-hour GBA demo, so we'll find a way to get it out there eventually. As for why the game didn't get legs, Shantae GBC was finished before GBA, but was released eight months after. When hopeful publishers look back at the previous game's numbers, they are often too low to justify a sequel. But, the 9.0 ratings and niche fanbase keep them intrigued. If you want more belly dancing hair whipping transforming genie girl action, I'd encourage you to visit the WF website and make yourself heard, since your collective voices can overturn these kinds of things. In the meantime, we'll keep trying to crack that nut.

Scorpion King and Sigma Star Saga were also amazing GBA games—and more recently you killed with Contra 4; in fact, I can honestly say that you did it better then Konami could have... Is this the one that's going to catapult you from relatively unknown to super-studio status.

John Beck: It is not at all clear whether we worked on Contra 4 at all. Since independent developers are subject to strict confidentiality clauses, it just can't be determined. Seriously though, it was a collaborative effort with the guys at Konami. Our people found a terrific synergy of sensibilities with theirs. We can't wait to get started on the next thing with them. As far as super studio goes, well... I guess then we'd be famous; and that just wouldn't be very healthy for our marriages, now would it Dave.

Matt: It's nice to flex our action game muscles, since those are the kinds of games we strive to make. When we have the freedom to express ourselves with an original game, we've been able to create something that is beyond the sum of its parts. Capcom, Namco, WB, and now Konami have each taken risks with us and each time a new fanbase was created, or in Contra 4's case, a dormant one was injected with new life (thank you Konami!). I hope publishers choose to tap into our ability to create or refresh gaming IP regularly. Sure one could hire WF to implement an existing design document, just as one could club Vader to death with a lightsaber handle…

Up to this point you've developed a lot of children's games. Is this by choice or to keep the lights on? For what it's worth, those kids are really getting there money's worth…

John: Thanks for asking that question, and for your kind sentiment. When you go out and offer to make games for money, you will find some things. You will find that people will want you to develop games based on popular brands. Someone calls and they just paid some money to get the rights to make a Boo Bah game. They call you motivated to hire you. Since they have already shelled out money for the rights, there is a lot of urgency for them to hire a developer who can actually make the game. This urgency has helped us to get paying projects signed quickly through the years. So I guess, to some extent, it was to keep the lights on. The other thing about mainstream brands is that they tend to play to kids. Handheld systems also play to kids. Taking all these things together, you can start to see how WF has built up such a resume of kids titles. So I guess our team is a little like U2, if U2 did nothing but children's albums for ten years. Kind of like the Wiggles but with more rock.

You have yet to break into the console world but given your track record with Nintendo something tells me you must have a Wii game back there somewhere… Is that the plan? Is Shantae alive and well and headed to a next-gen console?

John: In '07 we were so booked up on DS games that we didn't really have the bandwidth to develop anything original for Wii, and Wii demands original content. We are signed up as developers for Wii and have our kits. We have passed on some rush jobs with insufficient time frames and half-baked brands, and right now we are working on a game for WiiWare. It is in the puzzle/horror genre. It also has the

"So I guess our team is a little like U2, if U2 did nothing but children's albums for ten years. Kind of like the Wiggles but with more rock." -John Beck

Above: Before the storm that is Contra 4.

potential to be a retail product. Maybe that will end up being our ironic opening gambit in the console world. A terrifying game for kids...

Speaking of the Wii, as you've surely noticed, 90% of the games (well, of the publishers who finance them and developers who make them) are making games on the cheap that don't tap the system's capabilities in the slightest. In fact, most Wii games are akin to first- or second-gen PS2 games. Now that we've all seen what the system can really do thanks to Mario do you think that will change? Do you think Reggie's no-quality-control business plan will catch up to him?
John: The problem is "lead console," and "afterthought." So the other day somebody emailed me and said, "Here is a link to our PC game. Can you do a 'port' to Wii and have it ready in January?" "Lead console" is the platform the game is designed for. In that case it was PC. "Afterthought" is the console that the game is not designed for. The one you need to sloppily and quickly port it to, in order to maximize your investment in marketing/advertising. Wii is just not designed to work as an "afterthought" platform. Miyamoto has made it so.

Is the console difficult to figure out or have publishers and developers been cutting corners thinking that the system's casual gamer demographic doesn't know the difference? It's certainly selling well... Wasn't one of the main selling points of the Wii its ease of use for developers? It's at least an Xbox isn't it?
Matt: Our team got results very quickly, so I don't think the learning curve is too steep. Definitely not steep enough to excuse a glut of subpar games, and ports featuring buttons replaced with gestures (boo). Reliance on vigorous Wii wagging shouldn't be a game's hook, or the excuse for low visual quality, and we want to avoid that.

If you guys do make a Wii game, will we get normal and/or bump mapping—will it be on par with Conker on Xbox...in that league?
Matt: On our in-house WiiWare project LIT we're trying to utilize the Wii hardware without worrying about portability to other platforms, so we should be able to get the most out of what the system has to offer. All the same, expect our first game to be fun and inspired, but not necessarily a Mario Galaxy killer. We're focused on taking solid, attainable steps forward and refining as we go. But since the download size is relatively small, we want every art asset to ooze quality, so we'll try every trick out there. We've got a lot of experience with squeezing a lot out of a little (I think we're the only licensed E-Reader developer in town, go figure), so I hope we'll please audiences with great looking art that won't fill you up. WiiWare games will be considerably larger than 6K.

Your 2D skills speak for themselves. Why do you suppose we haven't seen any next-gen 2D games? Given the 360 and PS3's prowess I imagine you could do some amazing things with integrated 3D mechanics—moving into and out of the screen—not to mention detail and insane depth. Seeing as how anyone who started gaming with PlayStation has never played a 2D console game it would be like a new genre. Why is it considered poison and relegated to mobile systems?
Matt: Traditional animation and sidescrollers got a bad rap in the PS1 days for being expensive to create, and everyone was chasing the new idea of being immersed in a spatial environment. Well, games aren't all based on the immersion concept anymore, and 2D was expensive back then, but not by today's 3D standards. So in our case, we do both and use them as tools appropriate to the task at hand. But if someone like THQ requested a Spongebob or Fairly Odd Parents game that looked exactly like the show, maybe that would be a good kick in the pants to get a next-gen 2D effort rolling. Or imagine Duck Amuck on Wii in 2D. Our capabilities are certainly there. In the meantime I'm excited to see what Vanillaware is doing with their fighting game.

What does it take to sell a new IP these days? Is it harder or easier than say five years ago? Do you need a playable demo or can you pitch a design? With your track record surely you have your pick of publishers for a new Wii IP...
John: From my vantage new IP is easier on console, and it is easier on newer platforms. When we made the deal with Capcom to publish Shantae for GBC, it was really unusual and a challenge because it was late in the life of GBC (GBA had already shipped). It was also a challenge because of the bias toward recognizable characters that exists on handheld systems. On console, things are better. If you have a running demo with a vertical

"Traditional animation and sidescrollers got a bad rap in the PS1 days for being expensive to create..." -Matt Bozon

WayForward
brilliant Action/RPG
Sigma Star Saga

slice of gameplay, and it is fun, it is a very compelling starting point to get a publishing deal signed. For an independent developer like us, the challenge is making ends meet with our day jobs, while allowing that beautiful demo to gestate.

What about an XBLA or PSN game? Again: the perfect 2D canvas for you to paint on...

John: We have not managed to get much traction on XBLA. Back when we had the extra manpower to maybe invest in a demo, the process of pitching started with written concept specs. It is not like you could get a development kit and just start building something. Lately we hear it is easier to get stuff going but we have just been focused on this round of projects. PSN has not even come into discussion at our shop. There is no real reason I guess, beyond our decided focus on Nintendo systems.

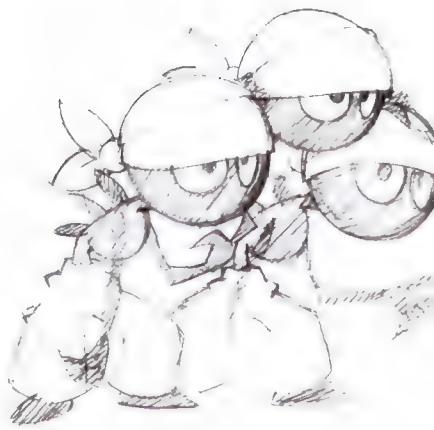
It seems like every great independent developer that does get discovered gets acquired only to end up making shoddy licensed games under duress. Why is that? Is that the only road to the brass ring? Do you think companies like Throwback Ent. dedicated to a small studio system developing original IP will save the day?

John: We have maintained our independence for just a little over 10 years now. April 1 is actually our independence day. April Fools! When you are looking at getting acquired, one factor motivating you is the financial shape you are in. How much do you need the deal? When we get into conversations about getting bought, the numbers being thrown around have never made sense from a business perspective. Somebody said in the press recently, that Travelers' Tales got bought for 200 mil. It's been great Dave, but if we get offered that, I'm not going to stick around. Matt can talk about the creative freedom perspective, but I think it only makes sense to get acquired by somebody who has the ability to build original franchises.

Matt: If someone want's to buy WF, please install heat and air conditioning.

What does a game like Contra cost these days? Under a million? Can you develop a quality next-gen game for under two million these days? Or is five million the norm?

John: The rule of thumb has built up in our industry that you can make a game for somewhere between $10,000 and $12,000 per head, for each month of development. So it depends on team size and development time. People have just arrived at the reality that is what it costs to get a game done. While the specific budgets are a closely guarded secret, you can start



to figure things out from there. If you use one person, and it takes you 100 months to make a DS game, it is going to cost you a million dollars. However, that person better be very talented, and you better hope that a new platform hasn't killed DS by the time you are done.

Say I wanted to develop a mind-blowing hand-drawn 2D game on the Wii. What am I looking at?

John: A path of grief and suffering. [Laughter] Seriously though, teams make games and there is so much needed to keep a team together, productive, and happy. You are going to need a good deal of money for their Mt. Dew, for example. This means that you will need a financial partner. But the financial partner is not going to want to fund development to completion with no idea about who is going to sell the product when it is done. So you are also going to need a publishing commitment. The best formula for getting all this stuff is to scrape together a demo however you can and get a publisher attached.

What about self publishing? How difficult is it to get a single SKU into the big retailers?

John: We were once in that game, when we were owned by an educational publisher back in the early '90s. Man that game is not a game that leads to having much time for making good games. So manufacturing, marketing, and selling a product into retail are very different competencies than game design and development. We really have a lot of respect for what our publishing partners overcome in the way of challenges on that front. One possibility for us that seems more accessible is on-line distribution aka WiiWare. We will see how that goes.

Well, whatever you do we'll be here to sing its praises. Thanks for speaking with us.

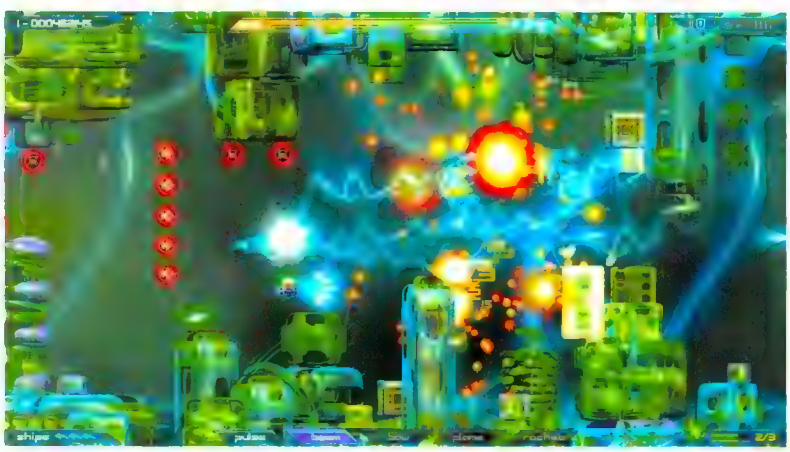
John: Thanks for always having our back these many years Dave, we want you to know we noticed and we appreciate it!

Matt: Please keep putting out the best looking magazine ever!

Söldner-X Himmelsstürmer

High-def horizontal shooter revival

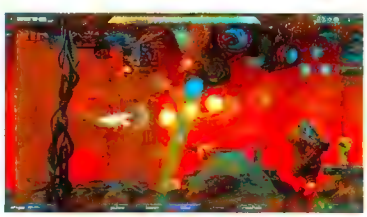
"Himmelsstürmer" translates into Charging the Sky: someone who has set his mind to defy the impossible.



It's an age of high-definition widescreen gaming, the kind of format that begs to host traditional side-scrolling space shooters. Eye-popping colors and fidelity, a wide 16x9 screen filled with action and projectiles; it's perfect. Has the form been lost to history, replaced by a legion of twin-stick Geometry Wars clones? Where's our next-gen Thunder Force or Darius? Merry Christmas horizontal shooter fans. Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer has arrived. Developed by SideQuest Studios on behalf of Eastasiasoft for English and Japanese speaking audiences, Söldner-X blasts off on PC in December and then lands on PS3 in the new year.

This is the part where you ask how a Hong Kong-based publisher hooks-up with a German developer to build a Japanese-influenced side-scrolling shooter for next-gen specs. Söldner-X is actually SideQuest's maiden voyage. Led by Marcus Pukropski, a veteran of Blue Byte and Ubisoft, this team of die-hard Gradius V, Einhander and R-Type fans intends to specialize in classic game design reborn in high-definition—catering to hardcore gamers from the East and West.

Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer looks very nice running in 720p on a big display. You're just not accustomed to seeing a classic side-scrolling shooter design in HD. Sure, the world knows contemporary high-def side-scrollers thanks to a handful of new school 2.5D shooters on XBLA, but these games lack the classic vibe of Söldner-X, whose bitmap art style emphasizes extremely crisp pre-rendered graphics and vintage parallax scrolling layers. It's sort of like some of the latter day Neo Geo shooters, just a zillion times cleaner. On the other hand,



"You're just not accustomed to seeing a classic side-scrolling shooter design in HD."

First Print Limited Edition

there isn't as much background object animation as I'd hoped for. You don't want too many minor animating background doo-dads in a shooter as it can distract from the bullet dance, but some of the layers in Söldner-X (the jungle comes to mind) are rather stiff and sterile.

This observation prompted me to step away from Söldner-X and play a few mid-'90s horizontal shooters I had on hand (Hyper Duel, Darius Gaiden and Pulstar). I needed some perspective; to see how much commotion these developers achieved on systems with less processing power than your cell phone. Söldner-X is missing some of the flair and pageantry of its Japanese-origin brethren, like high energy intro cinematics, urgent boss warnings and dramatic background transitions, but it's absolutely not lacking intensity or intelligence. It clearly bears the influence of modern shooter design, with a deep chaining system, weapon levelling, and surprisingly tactical shooting.

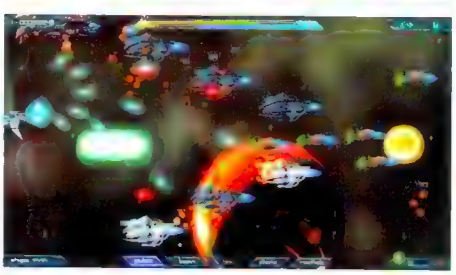
The chaining method in Söldner-X is based on consecutive blasting of the same enemy type. Level design and enemy patterns are precisely balanced around this concept, so as you tear across the 12 stages destroying an infected alien host you'll find loads of key patterns to exploit. Each of the five weapon types (pulse, beam, bow, flame and rocket) can be individually powered-up, and every enemy in the game has a specific weapon weakness. Enemies will also drop specific power-ups based on the weapon you kill them with. Learning how to hop from weapon to weapon while maintaining your chain and prioritizing enemy clusters is quite the juggling act, and satisfying once you get to grips with it.

I think I was already sold on Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer the moment I heard the cool computer voice say "confirmed" as you click the start button. Or the lovely electronic tones as you enter your name into the high score ranking. If the fine sound design (including quirky German-accented voice over) doesn't do it for you, Rafael Dyll's energetic and memorable synth soundtrack is sure to please. And until Natsume's Omega Five arrives on 360, Söldner-X will reign as the sharpest-looking next-gen horizontal shooter. As I discovered during my first few days with the game, the real fun in Söldner-X can be found in its smart balancing, addictive chain patterns and accumulated stats. SideQuest's next retro revival should be a Contra or Final Fight-style game in HD.

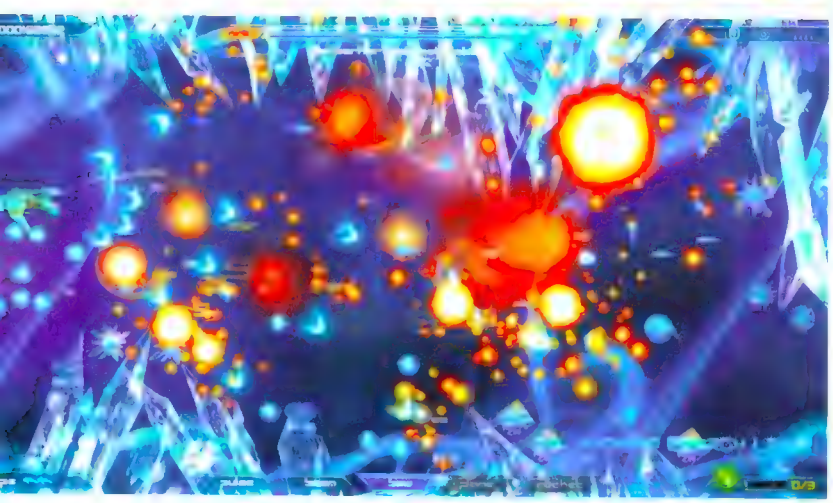
Söldner-X: Himmelsstürmer — score 7

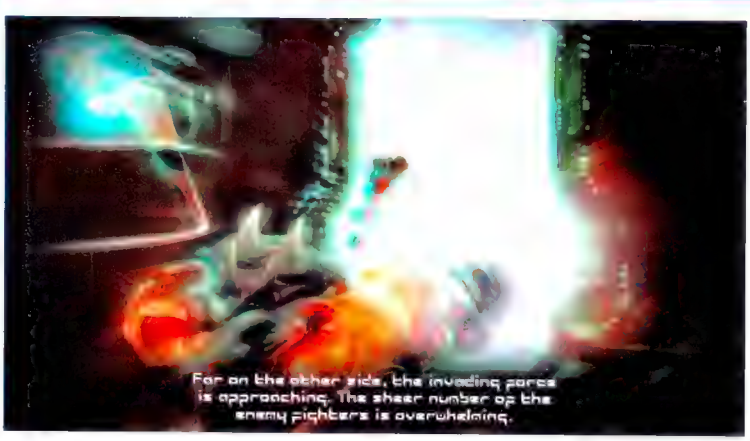
+	Entertaining chains and level design. Sharp, clean 720p graphics. Rafael Dyll's best tunes to date. Co-op play
–	Some lifeless backgrounds, occasional slowdown. Some stage themes are underwhelming. Capped at 1280x1024
Developer	SideQuest Studios
Publisher	Eastasiasoft
Online/Multi	2p co-op online ranking
Available	December 14
ESRB Rating	T

"...the real fun in Söldner-X can be found in its smart balancing, addictive chain patterns and accumulated stats."



Award winning





Warhammer Age of Reckoning Online

Playing for Keeps

words Mike Griffin

We asked EA Mythic founder, general manager and lead designer Mark Jacobs why so many online RPGs have crashed and burned in a post-World of Warcraft industry. "I said it before WoW came out and I said it again in Austin this year: There is a lot of dumb money floating around and a lot of developers who are not capable of making these games, thinking they can just do what the other guy did. Bad things are going to happen in this industry. We are going to lose a lot of games and a lot of companies." Obviously Mark hopes that his game, Warhammer Online, won't be among the defeated. His company recently made the decision to delay the game to late spring.

"Making an online RPG, especially one that caters to a subscription model, is the single hardest challenge in the games industry," Mark assured us. His team pulled the plug on the Warhammer Online beta this fall after accumulating thousands of stats through a sophisticated metrics system. "In the end we had a ton of people saying they wanted open field Realm vs. Realm warfare. The problem with open field RvR is that it can quickly degenerate into ganking, and that's no fun for anyone except the gankers."

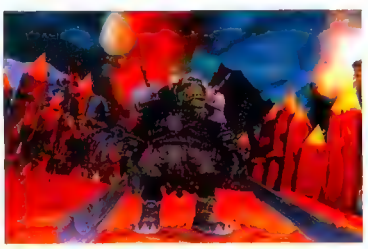
The solution? EA Mythic has just revealed Warhammer Online's epic open field Keep battles. Is there any better way to attract legions of blood hungry player slayers than to give them a big shiny fort to fight over? Not likely. Might as well pin a giant blinking neon "Siege me!" sign to the side of the keep. Empire and Chaos will test the first edition of Keep combat as Mythic sorts out the micro-objectives for each stronghold. While gank patrols will still exist in open zone player versus player gameplay, the yet-undisclosed Keep siege rewards may curb their habits.

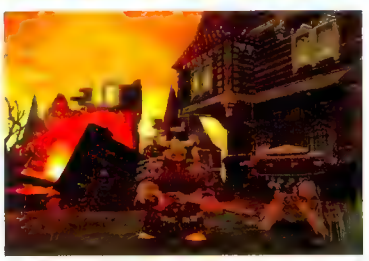
EA Mythic has more big plans for Warhammer Online, like the addition of a deep Career Mastery system (think Talent paths). While each of the game's 24 playable careers will have Core skills that help to define a general role, this new system will allow players to pursue three Paths of Mastery, choosing supplemental Actions and Tactics that punctuate a character with abilities that compliment one's gameplay style. If you're a Sword Master dead set on becoming the ultimate tank, for example, you'd likely invest plenty of points into the Path of Vaul, a defence-heavy mastery.

The next time WAR opens its beta doors (you can sign up at betacenter.eamythic.com), players will see a few more surprises. New "Marvels"—massive iconic buildings—have been added to towns, and existing Marvels have had their interiors fully modeled, ripe for insane RvR combat. Look forward to wild sorcerous melee inside the Magus Tower in the Chaos capital of The Inevitable City, or a last stand in the throne room of the Empire's Emperor, Karl Franz. EA Mythic is also adding a full armor tinting system, a trophy inventory with thousands of possible combinations of medieval bling, and oh-so-soon we'll begin to see glorious player mounts. In an ideal world, when does Mark want to release Warhammer Online? "We'll deliver it when we know we're going to have the best game out at the time."

"Making an online RPG...is the single hardest challenge in the games industry."
Mark Jacobs, general manager/lead designer, EA Mythic

It's hammertime for this shaman's squig.



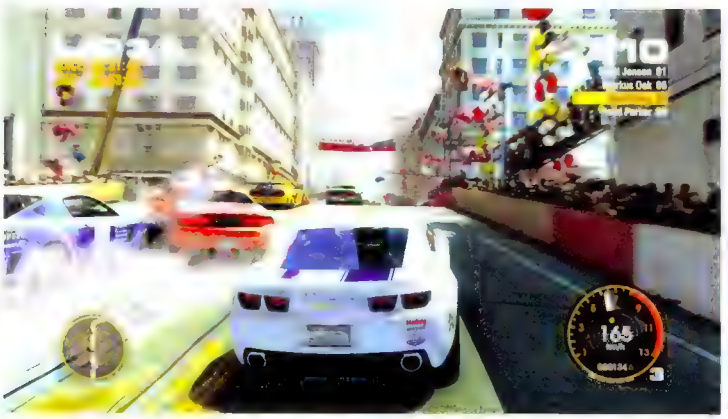


Warhammer Online Age of Reckoning	
System(s)	PC
Developer	EA Mythic
Publisher	EA Mythic
Online/Multi	Persistent online
Available	Q2 2008

GRID

Road racing expertise

words Mike Griffin



Fine-tuned drift racing joins the series.

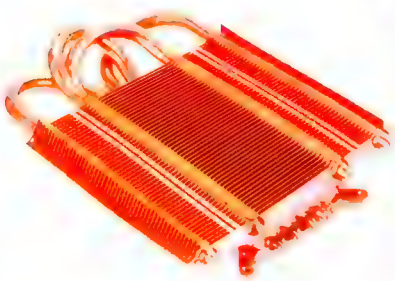
GRID	
System(s)	PC Xbox 360 PS3
Developer	Codemasters Studios
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	Online racing
Available	Q2 2008

"GRID will turn heads with dramatic, lavishly modeled official circuits and roads, in addition to the franchise-requisite championship events."

ask alienware

no. 018 // january 2008

q. The media center PC has gained greater acceptance in the living room (especially with my family), but for a lot of people the added noise can be a real turn-off. I'm sensitive to it. Maybe if I was only outputting at 720p I could use some quiet, cooler-running parts, but to game at 1080p most of the required specs are, well... loud! Any recommendations for us HTPC guys to game at the high end but keep the sound at the low end? Thanks.
Roman, GA.



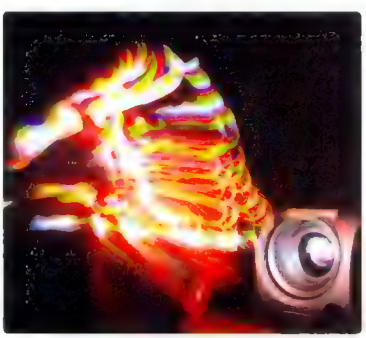
Yes it's possible, but with some increase in cost. There are plenty of passively cooled video cards, and even some passively cooled power supplies. This will lower the noise quite a bit, but you'll still need fans in the system to circulate air around for everything to stay cool running.

q. Realistically, can *anything* run Crysis smooth at 1080p resolution with everything dialled to 'High' in DX 10? That game is a beast in DX 10! A really beautiful creature. I ask because it takes a serious toll on my computer even at 1680x1050 res, so I bet it destroys PCs at 1920x1200 and 2500x1650! It's definitely a forward-looking game...
Luke, PA.

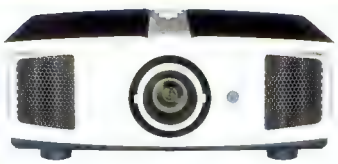
Believe it or not, it's possible—if you have the right equipment. A pair of higher powered PCI-E video cards

and a dual core processor with enough RAM should handle the game at those resolutions. And if you go with the Dx10 client, running Vista, be absolutely sure to find all of the game-enhancing hotfixes and patches that Microsoft has made available in the last 2-3 months.

q. Does Alienware encourage projection-based gaming? I'm thinking of getting a nice high-def projector and using a big screen or wall...Are there any major downsides to gaming this way? I figure maybe a HD projector is cheaper than a big LCD or plasma, and the potentially *massive* image seems cool...
Troy, CA.



Alienware endorses gaming any which way gamers want to. If you want to game on monitors or projectors



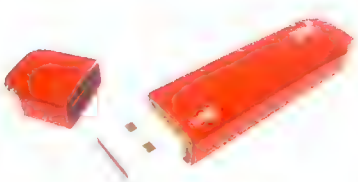
the experience is yours. However, you should consider the factor of ambient light, especially during the day, plus the space of the gaming room. Projectors do put off a decent amount of heat and require maintenance and parts replacement (sometimes expensive).

"However, you should consider the factor of ambient light, especially during the day."

Q. How many games are actually programmed to use 768 MB to 1 GB of video memory? And wouldn't high video RAM end up being a negative in Windows Vista if you're using the 32-bit version? Vista kind of makes a shadow of your video RAM in the main system RAM's addressable space, right? So gaining 768 or 1 GB of video RAM might actually "steal" the equivalent in system RAM? This is why I fear upgrading to Vista 32-bit. Could a gig of ReadyBoost memory help to offset this problem?
Karl, QC.

The newer the game, the more likely it is to use as much memory as it can. As far as shadowing goes, there are

very few DX 10 cards that would behave this way. Most of the DX 10 cards use the onboard memory they supply. You are more likely to see the shadowing of cards with memory less than 256 MB. A gig of memory for ReadyBoost won't fix that specific problem, but it certainly helps with all kinds of *other* functions. The faster the read/write speed of the stick, the bigger performance boost it will give.



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American McGee painting it black

e chat with game designer American McGee for an update on his latest project, Grimm, a twenty four episode re-imaging of classic fairy tales destined for GameTap in early spring.

Interview

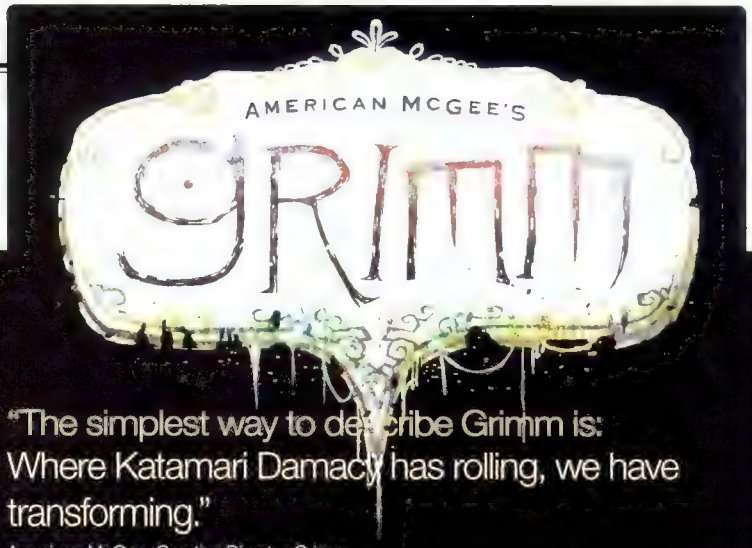
American McGee, Creative Director Grimm

Progress seems brisk; you've already wrapped-up the Red Riding Hood and Cinderella & Jack episodes, and Pied Piper is in the prep stages. How many people do you have working on Grimm these days?
Our internal team is nearly 30 people–made of core disciplines: concept artists, art directors, animators, programmers, level builders, producers, and management. Externally we maintain a staff of 19 asset builders—people focused entirely on production of 3D art assets. This model allows us to keep our internal team size small, which equates to higher levels of communication, work efficiency, a greater sense of ownership, and ultimately a higher quality work output.

How is the Unreal Engine 3 treating you?
We've been using UE3 for about a year. Before making the final decision to use UE3 we did a thorough review of other tech offerings. Ultimately, we found that we could not beat the pre-packaged tool setup and available support documents. During production we've been extremely happy with the engine. It's allowed us to realize some really interesting stuff in very little time.

So what's it like hand-picking these Grimm fables for a re-telling?
There's a formula we use. First, we sort tales based on what we believe their public awareness level to be. Then we examine their structure for locations, characters and events that could support game play. Finally, we build game play scenarios around scenes inside the narrative. Often we've found that very well known tales don't offer the sort of location and character diversity we need in order to deliver something interesting to the audience.

How do you get the story across to the player?



"The simplest way to describe Grimm is: Where Katamari Damacy has rolling, we have transforming."

American McGee, Creative Director Grimm

We deliver each fairy tale in a light and dark puppet theater format. When an episode first begins the player will see the light version of the story told. Gameplay then begins and the player can work to darken things up. Once finished with painting darkness all over the tale, the player is once again shown the puppet theater—but this time in a very grim tone. VO is used extensively throughout these scenes and inside the game. Each new episode is quite unique in terms of characters, art assets, and other creative aspects. Gameplay stays relatively similar, but everything else changes dramatically.

What's the gameplay hook?
The simplest way to describe Grimm is: Where Katamari Damacy has rolling, we have transforming. Wherever our main character Grimm goes, things transform from light to dark. Rocks become skulls, trees become gallows, houses burn to the ground, cows turn to sacks of bone, birds turn to vampire bats, etc. As Grimm gains more dark power he's able to convert larger and larger objects at greater distances. There are some further attack mechanisms being worked on too. Our puzzles have mainly to do with forming strategies to darken large areas and overcoming blocking obstacles. We've been striving to keep game play as simple and easy to understand as possible, and so we have a very fun, very casual game.

How are you going to get players to come back to these short episodes after they've completed them?
We see the episodes as being re-playable purely on the light/dark transformation concept. We've found that our team and our testers can re-play episodes many, many times and still be mesmerized by the act of converting the world. Again, a Katamari Damacy reference probably helps to most quickly establish a similar play dynamic and driver for re-playability. The world you explore is a tightly packed, very artful, very diverse series of scenes inspired by that week's fairy tale.

Grimm sounds intriguing as ever. Thanks for the update American.

Download this:
Last of the Pacinos

Bill Gray

"...the centerpiece is the Burst Angel Battle Record, which lets you witness the spectacular fight scenes and memorable moments from each of the series' 24 episodes."

a

...set sights when 2005, *Burst Angel*'s popularity ...rested in its fluid CG ... and traditional animation ... from GONZO, the gold ... ard), its neo-western plots, and ... its copious fanservice. I'm gonna ...me right out and say it – the one ... OVA episode billed as the main event ... *Burst Angel Infinity* isn't very good. ... fact, you'd have to be a diehard ... set to ignore its shortcomings, from ... clichéd plot, to its disappointingly ...ecodon animation, to the lack of many ... of the characters from the show.

With that out of the way, I can ... the extras, which are plentiful, useful, and definitely the reason you should buy this title. Instead of boring features like cast interviews or "making of" featurettes, *BA Infinity* comes loaded with actual animation from the show. Definitely the centerpiece is the "Burst Angel Battle Record," which lets you witness the spectacular fight scenes and memorable moments from each of the series' 24 episodes.

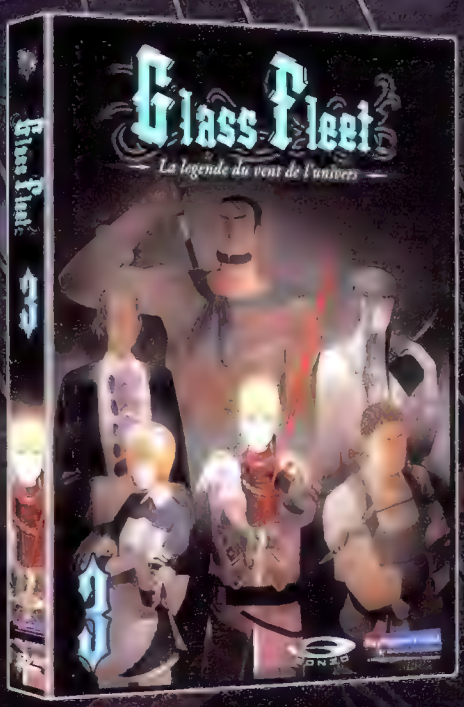
Also included is a short animated feature titled "The Lightness and Darkness of Jo," which offers copious fanservice along with the story of how Nieg and Jo, the centerpieces of Burst Angel, first met. A music video with character designs from Ugetsu Nakua and the original Japanese previews for the OVA and all 24 episodes round out the included extras.

Sadly, seeing animation from the actual show in the "Battle Record" only makes the lackluster effort of the OVA that much more glaring.

Burst Angel Infinity	score
+	The extras get a 9.0
–	The actual OVA episode. A shame it wasn't better
Released By	[illegible]
Volume	1
Running Time	[illegible]
Episodes	1
Rating	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

From the creators of Robotech and Escaflowne

Fight For Your Freedom!



Glass Fleet

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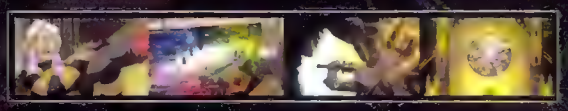

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GONZO FUNIMATION

Sgt. Frog

Fraggin' Frogs from outer-space

Poor Sgt. Kerero: not only can he not catch a break in his plight for global domination but ADV can't seem to get his anime series out either after sitting on it for nearly a year. At least we've got this newly released compilation from TokyoPop comprised of the first three volumes of the manga packed into one three-inch-thick collection. For the uninitiated, Sgt. Kerero is the commanding officer of the Keron invasion force advance team of the 58th planet of the gamma storm cloud system…a little toad with a big problem. When his cover is blown and secret weapon lost (well, sort of) while planning the Keron invasion of Earth, he's forced (well, sort of) to take up residence at the Hitana household while he figures out a new plan…as soon as he can reestablish communications with his homeworld. Comedy quickly ensues when 7th grader Natsumi and her kind-hearted brother Fuyuki discover the little invader, and ultimately accept him into their domicile as a domestic pet (well, sort of). Between his daily chores and more-teenage-drama-than-frogs-have-warts, things really heat up when Private Tamama, First Sergeant Kululu, and Corporal Giroro show up (more frogs), not to mention Angol Moa, The Lord of Terror as foretold by Nostradamus who happens to be an adorable little girl… related to a frog. You need to see and read this—right now.

Read it if… I tell you to! Now move!

Sgt. Frog	score
Publisher	
Volume	
Story	
Art	
Genre	
Available	

We Shadows

Shakespeare Does Slapstick

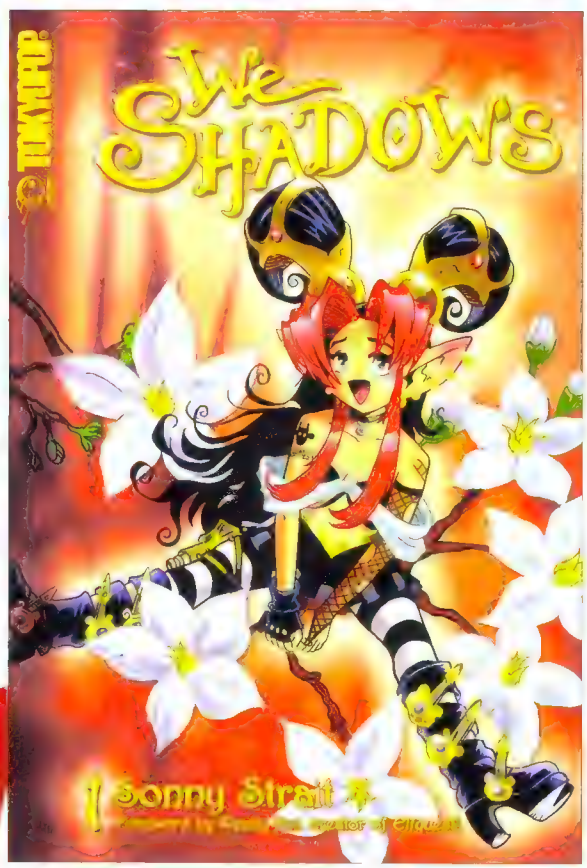
Unless you're intimately familiar with the plot of A Midsummer Night's Dream, it's going to take you at least two trips through We Shadows to understand what you're reading. That's not to say you won't enjoy it the first time around—Shadows is packed with enough cultural references and in-jokes to satisfy the most-avid Simpsons fan. But without a second read, you're going to wonder if author Sonny Strait forgot to throw a plot in there as well.

A plot exists, and it's a good one (Billy Shakespeare didn't have too many bad ones). Too bad it took me a surprising amount of effort to extract it from the layers of self-parody, similar-looking characters, and abrupt scene, setting and character shifts. I'll try to strip it down to bare bones for you: the land of Faerie begins to fall apart when King Oberon gives away his crown and falls asleep, leaving the glamour faeries in charge of the kingdom. The faerie bimbettes promptly depose and imprison Queen Titania, and as Puck her loyal knight is missing and presumed dead, all sorts of powder puff chaos breaks loose.

Strait's disjointed brand of storytelling certainly takes getting used to, especially if you usually read manga with fairly straightforward plots. "Wacky" would be a good word to describe Shadows. Also "zany," "unique," and "worthwhile." An English teacher could have a lot of fun using this to teach Shakespeare to a high school class—but don't let that stop you from picking it up on your own.

Read it if… You think Shakespeare is a tribal dance.

We Shadows	score
Publisher	
Volume	
Story	
Art	
Genre	
Available	



NOiSE

Make some!

The best way to describe NOiSE, Tsutomu Nihei's prequel to his bleeding-edge Blame!, is Aeon Flux married to Neuromancer with a manga twist. Visionary and haunting, NOiSE doesn't so much tell a story as it does assault you with images and carefully chosen text. It left me shell-shocked, wondering what the devil I just experienced, wanting to know more about its dark vision of a future society going horribly awry.

Here's the setup, near as I can figure. As a detective in a sprawling, metal and concrete world known (from Blame!) as "the City," Musubi Susono is called in to investigate the serial kidnapping and murder of several children. Her investigation leads her to a secret society known as the Order, which seems dedicated to destabilizing the Netsphere, a sort of "super-Internet" that connects humanity on a biological, rather than electronic level.

Musubi's struggles against the Order form the backbone of the story, told in brief bursts of exposition and exceptionally violent and graphic combat. Much of the book is given over to Nihei's recognizable visual style, which captures the loneliness and isolation of life in the City and eloquently depicts the love/hate relationship with technology that characterizes the best science fiction.

NOiSE stuck with me long after I finished reading it. As a standalone story, it is inadequate—it doesn't give you enough time to immerse yourself its dystopian hallucination the way Blame! does. But as an exercise in world-building, setting and tone, it stands unique.

Read it if... You took the green pill.

NOiSE	score
Publisher	[illegible]
Volumes	[illegible]
Story	[illegible]
Art	[illegible]
Genre	[illegible]
Available	December

Fairy Tail

It's magic!

I didn't think I'd live in a world where fantasy would be so hip. In-between 1990 and, say, 1999, the Blockbuster fantasy section was about ten cassettes long. Seen Dark Crystal? Seen Labyrinth? Willow? Eh, we're done. What's in action?

Now, every media on earth wants to be magical. And I'm all for it.

One of the most popular manga in Japan, Fairy Tail, tells the story of young Lucy, a wizard-ess who wants to join a guild of wizards known as – you guessed it – Fairy Tail. Along the way, she meets Natsu (and his cat sidekick Happy), who unbeknownst to her is already a member of this guild. When Lucy is kidnapped by some local villains, Natsu rescues her . and inducts her into the club. Taking on missions for the guild, Lucy, Natsu, and an ever-expanding cast of characters (the manga is 65 chapters as I write this) have adventures all over the land of Fiore.

The art and story are by Rave Master's Hiro Mashima, and is drawn a little like the style of omnipresent One Piece. The character designs aren't my thing, frankly; I like my manga to be a little less bold, a little less cartoony.

But with a pedigree like Rave Master, and the popularity being so consistent in Japan, chances are the manga will deliver. It's got an oddball sense of humor, and plenty of magic.

Read it if... You love the designs like DH and lotsa fantasy/adventure.

"Every media on earth wants to be magical. And I'm all for it."

Fairy Tail	score
Publisher	[illegible]
Volumes	[illegible]
Story	[illegible]
Art	[illegible]
Genre	[illegible]
Available	[illegible]

gear

words Dave Halverson

HEADPLAY Personal Cinema System

Not so long ago virtual displays were the stuff of science fiction, but over the last decade they've slowly evolved into true alternatives to standard displays; recently coming into their own in a number of configurations, mainly for the iPod and various portable DVD players and the like. What makes the HEADPLAY unique is its universal compatibility with virtually any device but especially gaming consoles, where it outshines anything in its class. Unlike its predecessors and competition, the HEADPLAY can be effortlessly fine-tuned for any individual and boasts proprietary technology that makes its simulated 52-inch display look like HD through the use of an S-Video connection. It's designed more as a personal cinema or game station than a portable device (you won't be hooking it to your belt loop or using it on the plane), so if you're looking for a comfortable cutting edge virtual headset, you can't do any better for the price (or actually anywhere near it). The Visor—which makes you look like a golfer from the year 2050—displays true stereoscopic 3D natively with no additional lenses required using an LCoS micro-display that delivers pixel perfect image quality by converging colors into a single pixel, delivering separate but identical images to each eye to eliminate eye strain. The end result: the best, most comfortable video game immersion you can imagine… tethered to your head.
$499
www.headplay.com

dreamGear LavaGlow Wireless controller for PS3

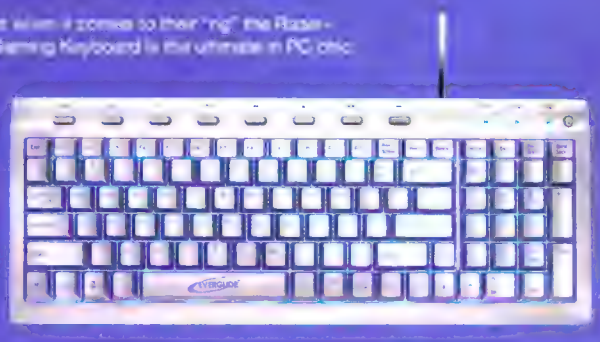
Latency free, offering touch-sensitive analog buttons and the latest in Radio Frequency and auto-scan technologies, dreamGear's LavaGlow Wireless is both comfortable for extended play and as you can see lit up and filled with red or blue goop! Well, we hoped it was goop, it's more like liquid. Still—it's a quality PS3 pad with a cool hook. Available wherever fine peripherals are sold.
(40-80GB) $34.99

React Guitar Hero stand and carrying cases

With millions of virtual rockers around the globe taking up the plastic guitar comes the need for a place to rest your weary axe after a grueling set or transport it without looking like a complete bonehead. Enter React's Guitar Hero guitar stand and soft guitar cases. The cases—available in various colors and embroidered insignia—feature a padded main compartment, two accessory compartments, a shoulder strap and a carrying handle. The stand snaps together and apart easily making it the most convenient (although it's fairly lightweight as a result), and comes packed with a great shoulder strap and mostly lame stickers (fits both smaller and larger guitars). Available at Best Buy.
www.reactgamer.com

Everglide Aluminum Keyboard

For those who demand the best when it comes to their "rig" the Razer-powered Everglide Aluminum Gaming Keyboard is the ultimate in PC chic. The ultra slim aluminum unit features soft touch and tactile feedback, 8 one-touch multimedia hot keys and has an on/off switch for backlight illumination for gamers who like it with the lights off.
www.everglide.com (special pricing available online)



DVD

Turok: Son of Stone

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

When the battle for tribal superiority spills across time Turok finds himself facing a brutal adversary... and dinosaurs! We've all been down this warpath before... Maniacal warlord invades village to kill, enslave and ultimately rule only to be foiled by a lone defender whose name usually also happens to be the title of the film. And what do maniacal overlords always do in this circumstance? Anyone? Kidnap the heroes would-be girlfriend of course. And so it goes... Now imagine all of this tyrannical fun via conventional Saturday morning TV animation. There's something so not right about token farmed-out American animation spurting blood like semis running over ketchup bottles. Ultimately *Turok: Son of Stone* delivers as an aside to the old video game license—the current video game Turok is set in the future—in terms of content, but fails miserably visually; which, when you're talking about animation, is kind of essential. Why the producers didn't bring in a better character designer boggles the mind. If I have Jeff Matsuda, LeSean Thomas, and Sanford Greene on speed dial so should they. It looks like a kids show, but kids can't watch it, and it plays like an adult cartoon but lacks the visual flair to attract anyone over the age of twelve. Tad Stones of *Hellboy* animated, Buzz Lightyear TV series fame, seems to be the go-to guy for this stuff, but he misses the mark here. - **Dave Halverson**

Halloween

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

The night before I watched Rob Zombie's *Halloween*, I went to see him open for Ozzy at the Staples Center—even though it should have been the other way around. The drum kit was perched on a massive demon head from which Rob emerged; there were dancing girls in cages, twisted corpses impaled on poles, massive skull adorned the amps, a giant green monster lumbering on stage, almost constant pyrotechnics, and two massive wide screens behind the stage streaming a montage of vintage horror film clips, various acts of extreme violence, clips from his previous films, and an entire vignette dedicated to bouncing boobs. The sound was thunderous and tight, Rob's voice raw power, and the energy level was off the scale. Rob Zombie is a full-on rock god.

Watching his *Halloween* redux the next evening, even though I've seen *Corpses* and *Rejects* a few times each, it dawned on me just how uniquely gifted an artist Mr. Zombie really is. He's juggling two careers, music and film—either of which can be all consuming—seemingly without breaking a sweat, while almost single-handedly reviving the horror film genre, elevating it from its current sorry state of sensationalistic clones back into an art form. Watching the making-of portion of the 2nd disc (which is packed with extras) Rob also appears to be one of the calmest, utterly prepared and intelligent directors around. He didn't just remake *Halloween*; he's re-imagined it, turning it into an entirely new film that charts a course through the twisted life of Michael Myers from his dysfunctional childhood all the way to his apparent demise. Along the way Zombie's troop of go-to actors make it ring true. Tyler Mane, Sheri Moon Zombie

(who shows great range), William Forsythe, Danny Trejo, Sid Haig (all too briefly) and other "Rejects" join the likes of Dee Wallace and Malcolm McDowell—both perfectly cast—along with newcomer Daeg Faerch (who plays young Michael so well he's probably lost all of his friends) to form a perfect storm of a cast.

None of Zombie's films strike me as mindless stabathons but *Halloween* is especially grounded in reality; it may also be his best-shot film to date. There's a genuineness to it that elevates it beyond the genre watermark, although it is a tad light compared to *Corpses* and *Rejects*. We come to understand Michael; almost sympathize with him...almost. I'd be thoroughly bummed if Rob Zombie ever stopped making music, but now I'd be just as upset out if he stopped directing. I can hardly contain my excitement for *El Superbeasto*. Stay well Rob. - **DH**

01_08 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Replay Cameras and Game Clarity: If You Get Bored Watching, The Game Probably Sucks.

Lately, I've been spending a lot of time watching gameplay videos on YouTube. I mean, that's not the only thing I've been watching on YouTube. That British fellow saying, "I can't believe you've done this," is a favorite of mine, as is the video of that Japanese girl chirping at the Dramatic Prairie Dog. Oh, and have you seen The Barking Cat? I've been watching *that* one for a whole year now. Man, does that make me laugh. But, ahem, when I'm looking for something that will awe me, I turn to game videos. You know the kind—un-hacked speed runs, incredible one-on-one vs. bouts, those close-call death matches.

My interest was piqued by Halo 3, actually. Bungie's extremely prescient decision to include replay, camera control, and video-sharing ability in that, uh, little-known 360 title has left me hungry for more. And I mean that literally. I would eat some of those death-match videos if I could.

I wish every game came with a pack-in replay camera. More than that, I wish every game had a "share" feature. If you do something astounding, there should be a way to save it and show it off.

As I shuffled through endless Halo 3 YouTube results this last month (or checked my Live friends' legally saved videos), I began to realize something about games and game footage. Halo 3 video files aren't just a way to waggle your e-penis (that's what Achievements are for, everyone). No, the Bungie-cam demonstrates how finely tuned Halo 3 Multiplayer games are. There's no fluff in Halo 3 death-matches. You can watch them from start to finish, and they only show you gameplay. It may not ALL be interesting, but a large part of it is.

And *then* there are those magic moments, where it's really something. Where two sticky grenades collide in mid-air, or someone hops off a Warthog just as it crashes into a human being. These aren't scripted events; they're just gameplay. The videos are demonstrations of how the game plays, given infinite variations on its elements.

Now, as I played through NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams this month, my biggest frustration with the game came from how little of the game I got to play. I mean, you can read my review for a real breakdown of that disappointment. It was my initial dissatisfaction with Super Mario Galaxy, too. There's a lot of Super Mario Galaxy that you *play*, but there's also a lot that you don't play. When did we start needing tutorials and cut-scenes in our video games? When did we give up our activity to be passive again? Why are so many games lacking in actual gameplay?

I grew up with video games that were *only* playable. Mario, Sonic, and the rest were Play Only. There wasn't anything else to do in those games, nothing to unlock, nothing to view in a diorama in-between levels. You certainly didn't have to run to levels in order to play them; they just happened next.

But now, developers are so concerned with justification and context, that we're spending half our games being told Why We Have To Collect Stars … as opposed to just, you know, getting them at the end of the level. Let me be honest, there's probably no reason one could invent to explain *why things are happening* in a platformer that would be more valuable to me than the platforming itself. Similarly, I don't need to know why a multiplayer deathmatch is occurring in Halo 3. It's just game.

Or, to put it another way: what would you rather watch? Mario gameplay, or Mario cut-scenes? If you had your choice between watching NiGHTS flying levels or the fountain hub world where the kids run around before they ENTER those levels, which one are you going to pull up on your screen?

While I'm on it, hub worlds are one of the dumbest things ever invented.

Anyway, all this *video* gaming has given me The Idea of the Month.

I think forcing developers to include a replay feature for games (and a service that lets you share those videos) would be an excellent way to streamline games themselves. As developers tweaked and tested the camera, maybe they'd realize which parts of games were uninteresting to watch—and it would most likely be all of the parts that the player wasn't playing.

Yes, this straw-man developer might say, "Why would anyone want to watch this game?"

To which my reply would be, "Aha! That means you need to work on it some more!"

Theoretically, all great games should be able to be viewed like sports. That's because—like sports—they're demonstrations of skill and serendipity. Unless a *feature* of your game are the parts where you're not playing (I recall the back of the Final Fantasy VII box that bragged about an hour of cut-scenes), then everything in the game should be playable. It's a *game*. There's no back-story in a Rubik's Cube. Jump Ropes don't have a hub world.

> "Theoretically, all great games should be able to be viewed like sports."

Obviously, there are some game types where interactivity isn't the focus—take visual novels, for example, or dating sims. But platformers? They're a type of game whose very name is short-hand for the kind of interactivity they include! Platformers need cut-scenes like racing games need a light gun.

(I mean, well, actually using a light gun in a racing game would be pretty great. Especially in a game like Gran Turismo. Extremely serious racing enthusiast game with optional drive-by shooting? That would be amazing. Maybe I would have made my point better if I'd said platformers need cut-scenes like survival horror needs a football playbook.)

Anyway, the point is that you can tell which games are *games* by how much of them you can watch replayed. I know that there's a small irony in saying that the best games *can* be watched, but you know what I mean. Unless you're making a piece of literature gaming, or a cinematic game, then leave it alone already! Don't try to fool us by making cut-scenes a selling point, either. We'll know if Mario Universe includes an "amazing four hours of CG cinemas" that you're not being honest. If developers want to include these self-satisfying cutscenes, then at least make them skip-able. Tutorials, same. We should be moving forward toward a more interactive future, not relinquishing control to make these titles more passive. We've already got television.

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-PLAY Magazine

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